

2012

Photojournalism as photonationalism

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PHOTOJOURNALISM AS PHOTONATIONALISM

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
Louisiana State University and
Agricultural and Mechanical College
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts

in

The Department of Art

by

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May 2012

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ABSTRACT

The public saw the wars in Iraq (2003 – 2012) and Afghanistan (2001 – present) through the lens of reverence and sentimentality toward the soldier. This was manifest not simply in the catchy “support our troops” rhetoric, but in the one-sided depiction of the experience of battle by the photojournalists who worked for the major news organizations in the Western world. From the emotionally bloated to the nationalistic, the photographs taken by “embedded” photojournalists, whether the result of heavy-handed censorship or merely political influence, presented a consistent image: the soldier as a selfless victim of his or her own heroism. This practice stands in stark contrast to the coverage and reception of the soldiers who fought in Vietnam, and who were often pictured and treated as inhumane and malicious.

This paper argues that while the strong public opposition to involvement in Vietnam was largely contingent upon the images that portrayed the soldier as an unethical and malignant presence, the lessons from Vietnam were, in this case, learned by the government and media organizations that sought to justify the similar invasive presence of soldiers in the Middle East. By comparing the common themes and iconic photographs from the war in Vietnam with those from the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, this paper shows how the newly established cult of the soldier attempted to instill public support for the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, while more critical and violent images, which formerly helped to galvanize opposition, were edited out

CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION: INCOGNITO ACTIVISTS? STOCKHOLM SYNDROME?

For the past several decades, a specter has been haunting America – the specter of the Vietnam War. The Vietnamese have long believed that the war dead return to haunt living. Heonik Kwon, in his book *Ghosts of War in Vietnam* (2008), used this imagery to illustrate how the memory of the war continues to be a significant presence in the lives of the Vietnamese people. But, like Marilyn Young suggested, the Vietnam War was not just a civil war between the North and South of Vietnam. It was also an American civil war.¹ Never since the actual Civil War had the country been more divided. With this context in mind, it should come as no surprise that Americans have been haunted by the specters of the Vietnam War just as the Vietnamese people have been haunted by the spirits of their war dead.

In fact, this very ghostly analogy has become popular parlance for the continued effect of the Vietnam War on the American consciousness. For one, the father/daughter team of Marvin and Deborah Kalb has recently published a book titled *Haunting Legacy: Vietnam and the American Presidency from Ford to Obama* (2010). In this far-reaching

¹ Marilyn B. Young. “Epilogue: The Vietnam War in American Memory,” in M.E. Gettleman, J. Franklyn, M.B. Young and H.B. Franklin (eds.), *Vietnam and America: A Documented History* (New York: Grove, 1995): 516.

² Marvin and Deborah Kalb. *Haunting Legacy: Vietnam and the American Presidency from Ford to Obama*. (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2011): 241

³ Kalb. *Haunting Legacy*: 292.

⁴ Vicki Goldberg. *The Power of Photography*. (New York: Abbeville Publishing Group, 1991).

⁵ As quoted in Sherry Ricchiardi. “Close to the Action.” *American Journalism Review*. (College Park: University System of Maryland Foundation, 2003) Online. Accessed 17 January 2012. <http://www.ajr.org/article.asp?id=2991>.

⁶ Andrew Lindner. “Among the Troops: Seeing the Iraq War Through Three Journalistic Vantage Points.” *Social Problems, Vol. 56, No. 1*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009): 24.

⁷ As quoted in Ricchiardi. “Close to the Action.”¹

⁸ Mike Kamber and Tim Arango. “4,000 U.S. Deaths and a Handful of Images.” *The New*

work, they trace the depth with which the idea of the Vietnam War has permeated American politics since the war ended. They show how the Vietnam War has been very much on everyone's mind as a precedent for foreign wars in the recent past.

One of the more recent incarnations of the specter of the Vietnam War showed itself during President Barack Obama's first National Security Council meeting in January of 2009. President Obama declared that Afghanistan was not Vietnam.² It is no coincidence that General David Patraeus, former commander of the U.S. and NATO forces in Afghanistan, wrote his doctoral thesis on the military lessons learned in Vietnam.³ Many precautions were taken to ensure that counter-insurgency struggles in the Middle East would not result in another "quagmire" like the Vietnam War.

But this specter of the Vietnam War is more than just a frequently cited military precedent. It was not just a mistake from which war planners have learned valuable strategy. It remains a ghastly memory always lingering on the horizon. But what made it so? Why is the American mind haunted with a veteran's violent post-traumatic flashbacks? What happened back in Vietnam that continues to live as a specter today?

Photographs are a significant part of the answer to those questions. Vietnam was photographed and televised more than any previous conflict. The photographs produced during the Vietnam War were not only numerous, but also high in rhetorical value. The events of Vietnam themselves were recorded and reported via photojournalism, but the images of these events became events themselves. On one level they were constative, meaning they signified content. On another level, they were also performative. Just like

² Marvin and Deborah Kalb. *Haunting Legacy: Vietnam and the American Presidency from Ford to Obama*. (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2011): 241

³ Kalb. *Haunting Legacy*: 292.

performative speech acts, their very presentation was an expressive action, intervening in actual events.

1.1 Photojournalism as Photonationalism

Photonationalism. What does that ominous neologism mean? Firstly, Vietnam was a watershed in the history of photography for a number of reasons. War has consistently been a point of interest for some of the world's most gifted photographers, and, in that sense, every war has its iconic images. Photographs from the war in Vietnam, however, are exceptional because they contradicted many of the commonly accepted themes and tropes of iconic war photography, especially for Americans. They provided valuable lessons in the power of photography, to borrow the title of Vicki Goldberg's book.⁴

Some of the most memorable photographs from the Vietnam War look like they could have been pulled from Goya's *Los Desastres de la Guerra*. They functioned then as they do now, as chilling indictments of violence and the political ideology that engendered it. These photographs were produced in a large part because of the freedoms that were granted to journalists during the Vietnam War. Most were independent from government agencies, roaming the front lines unencumbered and documenting the war as it appeared before the lens.

Photographs that enter the cultural vernacular become like signs. They lose some of their nuances and function metonymically for certain ideas. This is why they are called *iconic* – an icon as a representative symbol. Photographs characterize war and soldiers in

⁴ Vicki Goldberg. *The Power of Photography*. (New York: Abbeville Publishing Group, 1991).

general. By the close of the Vietnam War in 1975, several of these photographs-as-metonyms had helped to serve what became a national cause in the U.S. – the antiwar movement. Many photographs pictured the war as despicable and tragic for those involved. Moreover, there was unpredictable fallout from these photographs as they became weapons in the war to win hearts and minds. This is the first meaning of photonationalism. The photographs were not created as propaganda, yet were usurped to serve a national ideology.

Photographically speaking, there are several instances where Pentagon-policed embedding policy has led to photographs that paint the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan as contradictory to the motifs cemented into collective memory by Vietnam War photography. There are many celebrated photographs that present an overly-sentimentalized cult of the soldier, which deliberately subverts notions of the soldier as a tragic character in favor of the view of the soldier as a compassionate and selfless hero. This is the second meaning of photonationalism, photographs used to condition a mass mindset, and to cultivate nationalism and solidarity in spite of precarity and death. Before delving into the photographs any deeper, some explanation is needed to explain embedding policy because it had a significant affect on the mobility of photographers.

1.2 “Embedding” Photojournalists

Photojournalists documenting the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan were not granted the kind of unfiltered access that photojournalists were in Vietnam. After abundant criticism for the heavy-handed censorship during the first Gulf War, government officials settled on what was billed as a less-restrictive policy. Photojournalists who wanted to

document the conflicts were required to be embedded within a group of soldiers or stationed at a press base in a capital city. Unlike the photographers of the Gulf War, these men and women were granted real time access to the conflicts as they unfolded. However, soon after this policy was put into place it drew wide criticism for influencing the content of the news images.

Embedding photographers and journalists with troops in Iraq came first as a relief. Precious few had been granted access to the war in Afghanistan and many were thankful for the doors that were being slowly opened in Iraq, confident that similar policies would follow in Afghanistan. In 2003, a Los Angeles Times media critic was one of the vocal supporters of the embedding policy, insisting that journalists and photographers were being granted “a rare window on war.”⁵

As photographs began to emerge in the news, biting criticism was levied at embedded journalists and at the policy in general. Many journalists were deemed unable to capture the war in a fair and balanced light because they were presumed to suffer from a kind of “Stockholm syndrome.”⁶ The suggestion that embedded photojournalists inevitably suffer from a kind of Stockholm syndrome insinuates that the objectivity of their lens had been compromised by their consistent point of view. Since embedded photojournalists are guarded by a specific group of soldiers for a long period of time, they grow attached, and they can no longer report on them in an unbiased manner. Of those who remained in stalwart opposition to embedding policy, Alex S. Jones, director of

⁵ As quoted in Sherry Ricchiardi. “Close to the Action.” *American Journalism Review*. (College Park: University System of Maryland Foundation, 2003) Online. Accessed 17 January 2012. <http://www.ajr.org/article.asp?id=2991>.

⁶ Andrew Lindner. “Among the Troops: Seeing the Iraq War Through Three Journalistic Vantage Points.” *Social Problems*, Vol. 56, No. 1. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009): 24.

Harvard's Joan Shorenstein Center on the Press, Politics, and Public Policy is a paradigmatic example. He critiqued the content produced by embedded journalists, suggesting that it was propagandistic and that it appeared to be "one magnificent recruitment video" for military life.⁷

On some level, a consistent point of view is to be expected of photojournalists. The dominant subjects of war photographs produced by embedded journalists are no different. Predictably, embedded war photographers predominantly feature the soldiers with whom they are on assignment. This subject alone is not new. The soldier has been a popular and recurring character in the history of photography. From Crimea to the World Wars, during Vietnam and still today, photographs of soldiers in combat give the public relatable persons through whom the war experience can be filtered and to whom compassion can be bestowed. However, the positive connotation of recent war photographs warrants interrogation.

Mike Kamber and Tim Arango have connected the positive swing in combat photographs, as well as the absence of photographs of American casualties in the Iraq War, directly to embedding policy. Likewise, they have reported that the absence of particularly damning photographs stands in direct contrast, and perhaps even in reaction, to coverage of the Vietnam War:

If the conflict in Vietnam was notable for open access given to journalists – too much, many critics said, as the war played out nightly in bloody newscasts – the Iraq war may mark an opposite extreme: after five years and more than 4,000 American combat deaths, searches and interviews turned up fewer than a half-dozen graphic photographs of dead American soldiers.⁸

⁷ As quoted in Ricchiardi. "Close to the Action."

⁸ Mike Kamber and Tim Arango. "4,000 U.S. Deaths and a Handful of Images." *The New York Times*. Online. 26 June 2008. Accessed 17 March 2012.
<http://www.nytimes.com/2008/07/26/world/middleeast/26censor.html>.

In this report, Kamber and Arango note several instances when the photography of the dead or dying led to expulsion of the responsible photojournalists from their embed. The official reasons given for the expulsions were often cloaked in bureaucracy. Nonetheless, the intentions of military officials to control the content of the images is obvious. For example, Robert Nickelsburg was forbidden to work in military zones in Iraq after publishing a photograph of a soldier who, though not dead at the time of his photographing, died later of his wounds. Nickelsburg was expelled for breaking the embed rule of not obtaining written permission from the wounded soldier.⁹

While embedded with the U.S. military himself, Kamber was not just unable to photograph certain scenes because of military censorship. Susan Roa reported of one incident where Kamber was reprimanded on site for photographing a tragic scene:

One day during his time embedded, Kamber's unit was attacked by an IED. After a quick recovery from the debris, Kamber began to photograph but the unit captain yelled out to him "no pictures!" Kamber replied, "I'm here to do my job and you can take my cameras later." The U.S. military later warned the *New York Times* not to publish the photos and also threatened to revoke the paper's embed access. Mr. Kamber and his editors dug through the images from that day and tried to conform to the military's requirements. The graphic images were left unpublished.¹⁰

With situations like those Kamber described and experienced, it is evident that the government and U.S. Military learned the lessons of the Vietnam War with regard to war photography.

⁹ Kamber and Arango. "4,000 U.S. Deaths..."

¹⁰ Susan Roa. "Mike Kamber: Military Censorship." *BagNewsNotes.com* Online. 14 October 2012. Accessed 24 April 2012. <http://www.bagnewsnotes.com/2010/10/mike-kamber-military-censorship/>.

1.3 Photography, Public Opinion, and Political Ideology

Frequently, photographs of soldiers function metonymically, standing in for the wars themselves. This is one of the reasons some photographs are called iconic – an icon as a representative symbol. They characterize war and soldiers in general. Ideologically speaking, this photographic metonymy is ripe for appropriation by whichever political group finds the content particularly apt. Very plainly speaking, this is how photographs of soldiers committing ethically reprehensible acts in Vietnam after the Tet Offensive began to serve the anti-war cause, as if the photographer's themselves were incognito activists.

Even when photographers are in the right place at the right time, historic events do not always yield historic photographs. However, it might be correct to say that historic photographs do stir historic sentiments. Photojournalism is not necessarily at its most powerful and its most historic when it acts as a window into a unique and yet-unseen time or place. It is also powerful and historic when it acts as a mirror, accurately reflecting the identity of the society that employed it for facticity and meaning. Or, as Barbie Zelizer has put it, when photographs connote as well as denote.

If one were to accept briefly that photojournalism was hinged directly upon public opinion, one would expect the content produced during the Vietnam War and the Iraq War to be consistent. Why? The Vietnam War and the war in Iraq shared a similar dramatic decline in public opinion well before the wars ended. Afghanistan has a different story. Gallup poles show that until recently the public felt that the U.S. was

justified in its continued presence in Afghanistan.¹¹ In Iraq on the other hand, public opinion dropped dramatically as early as 2005. This rate was even faster than the decline of public support for Vietnam in the late '60s and early '70s.¹² The opposition to the war in Vietnam became a majority in August of 1968, and continued steadily upward through the war's end.

The relationship between the emergence of particularly damning photographs of war is the inverse of what might be expected from the comparison of public opinion. When public opinion began to sour on the Vietnam War in the late '60s and early '70s, sensational photographs cropped up as well, as if the photojournalists felt a responsibility to reinforce those sentiments. What are the iconic photographs from Iraq and Afghanistan that would match the fervor of protest? Arguably, there are none from Afghanistan. The Abu Ghraib archive was accidentally revealed and curbed the support of a large majority of Americans. Yet that was a different case entirely. Casual snapshots are not the product of photojournalists looking for news. It is well known that neither the war in Iraq nor the war in Afghanistan has been without blemishes, even when Abu Ghraib is excluded from consideration.

In the August 11, 2011 issue of the *New York Times Sunday Review*, William Deresiewicz asked explicitly what I am implying. Although he confessed to sincerely doubting there has been an Iraqi equivalent to the massacre at My Lai, he cited a few instances of gross American war misconduct: the prisoner abuse at Abu Ghraib, the gang

¹¹ Jeffrey Jones. "New High Call Afghanistan War a Mistake." *Gallup*. Online. 03 August 2010. Accessed 01 December 2011. <http://www.gallup.com/poll/141716/new-high-call-afghanistan-war-mistake.aspx>.

¹² Frank Newport and Joseph Carol. "Iraq Versus Vietnam, a Comparison of Public Opinion." *Gallup*. Online. 24 August 2005. Accessed 01 December 2011. <http://www.gallup.com/poll/18097/iraq-versus-vietnam-comparison-public-opinion.aspx>.

rape at Mahmudiya, and the civilian massacre by the 5th Stryker Brigade. What did he see as the difference between these three atrocities? “Only the first (Abu Ghraib) has been widely discussed, likely because there were pictures. How many more of these have there been? Maybe none, maybe a significant number: until we ask – until we want to ask – we’ll never know.”¹³

Deresiewicz is on to two important things here. First, that there are cases of gross war “misconduct,” and second that they are only recognized as such when there are images. Images of atrocity are especially threatening to idealistic metanarratives that purport a clean and moral war because they directly contradict it. As Deresiewicz implies, when we see some images of atrocity, even if they are few in number, we are able to assume that they are just the tips of the iceberg. The war in Iraq was marred with incidents that were caught on the personal cameras of those involved and were thus outside of the long arms of government and big media regulation. This is not really the case with Afghanistan. Although the absence of atrocious images does not necessarily account for the public support for a war, the presence of images of atrocity can account on some level for its lack of support. However, the question returns, whether we can blame embedding for this ostensible absence.

The relationship between photographs and the public is neither univocal nor is it unidirectional. While the content of certain photographs may have an influence on the public’s interpretation of events like war, the public’s interpretation of events likewise affects how the content of photographs is viewed. Such is the case with photographs that

¹³ Deresiewicz, William. “An Empty Regard.” *The New York Times Sunday Review*, August 20, 2011, accessed August 29, 2011.
http://www.nytimes.com/2011/08/21/opinion/sunday/americas-sentimental-regard-for-the-military.html?_r=1&ref=opinion&pagewanted=all.

depict soldiers. While soldiers metonymically signify war, war often inadvertently characterizes soldiers.

1.4 Organization and Methods

If the message of the photographs from the Vietnam War can be interpreted as consistently anti-war, how are images from Iraq and Afghanistan to be interpreted? The story has been overwhelmingly one of liberation – gallant hero soldiers enduring hardships, becoming victims themselves to release the innocent from the grip of despotic rule. While photographs from the Vietnam War remind us continually of the meaninglessness of war, photographs from Iraq and Afghanistan frequently harken back to the war’s impetus; it’s emotionally wrought, entirely justifiable purpose. Most fall tragically in line with the official nationalistic mindset cultivated by “Support our Troops” rhetoric.

The following section, **SYMBOLIZING EVIL - VIETNAM**, will go into greater detail about how conflict photographs from the war in Vietnam imagined war metonymically via the image of the soldier. I will discuss the dialectics of content and connotation that made these photographs anti-war photographs. I will further argue that photographic metonymy functions in two ways: while photographs of soldiers negatively characterized the war, the war also negatively characterized the soldiers.

In the third section, **INVENTING HEROES – IRAQ AND AFGHANISTAN**, I will delineate the different ways in which the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan were photographed as “not Vietnam.” With Afghanistan, I will analyze photographs produced by embedded journalists that harken back to the impetus of the war (something Vietnam

notoriously lacked), 9/11, and the changed connotation of victimization in those photographs. I will analyze embedded journalists' photographs of the war in Iraq that point to the goal of the war, its anterior limit – the rescue of the helpless Iraqis from the tyrant Saddam Hussein, and the making of hero soldiers. I will pay specific attention throughout to images that are totems, rallying points that recall an archaic sense of patriotism, and those that are taboo.

In conclusion, I will consider the relationship between the two alternative problems of photography exemplified by the two historical periods discussed (the Vietnam war, and the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan). I will address the ethical problems inherent in a medium that assumes the mantle of objectivity, and I will approach the question of responsibility when it concerns taking and showing photographs.

Throughout, I treat photographs as artworks. How can I do this? Photographs that end up on the front pages of newspapers do not get there solely by virtue of the events they depict. Choices are made – first by the photographer when he or she shoots the images, second by the editor who picks from all the images shot, third by the viewing public who celebrates certain images more than others. All these choices are influenced by the myriad of iconography, connotation, style, tone encapsulated in the images – in short, these are aesthetic choices, the same kind of choices made by artists who use more traditional art media to communicate. For these reasons, I interpret the photographs in terms of their iconography, composition, and their political function separate from the actual events they depict.

I have organized the following chapters based firstly upon the topics I wanted to cover, and secondly upon chronology. So in that sense, I am writing firstly about

photography, and I am concerned primarily about how the qualities of photography and the politics of war affect the interpretation of images. Throughout, I also draw parallels between language and photography. I do this through word choice, using words like “tropes,” “metonyms,” “signifiers,” and “rhetoric” to encourage the reader to understand photographs as visual constructs with meaning rather than as records of events. I also compare specific, often vulgar, photographs to the specific, often vulgar, language of pundits in order to further call into question the notion of unbiased photography.

There are profound differences between the way photographs were presented to the public during the Vietnam War and the way photographs are presented today. The primary means of image consumption during the 1960s and 1970s were print media and television. Today we have a third means that often trumps the other two – the Internet. In order to maintain a consistent criteria, I limit my discussion to images that were printed in nationally reputable publications. For those images that I discuss as “iconic,” I consulted three archives which contain award winning photographs from the years of the Vietnam War all the way through to today: the World Press Photo archive, the Picture of the Year International Archive, and the Pulitzer Prize archive.

CHAPTER 2. SYMBOLIZING EVIL – VIETNAM: THE (UNINTENDED?) POWER OF PARTICULARLY DAMNING IMAGES

Just as the events of the Vietnam War forever altered the American understanding of war, the images from the Vietnam War established a previously-unexpected visual system. The iconic photographs from Vietnam stand now as a historical turning point where previously there was none. If the invocations of the Vietnam War signal disdain, a shameful pockmark on the face of American history, what then does the image of the Vietnam War signify? How do the photographs of the Vietnam War haunt photojournalism and American culture?

War has never been clean or pretty. Gunther Lewy has argued that the Vietnam War was not dirtier or uglier than conflicts in the past. In one example, he reminded us that napalm, a source of many Vietnam horror stories, was simply a more advanced use of fire, which itself was an ancient weapon of war.¹⁴ On one level, the fact that these photographs brought horrors that were common on the battlefield to American's breakfast tables made them exceptional.

War is an ethically ambiguous practice. Most people would consider it foolish to assume that Vietnam was the first war with so-called collateral damage. What made this collateral damage utterly despicable in Vietnam was the confluence of special circumstances that existed in the climate of the American understanding of the war. Young Americans in the prime of their lives were being drafted to a tiny country in Southeast Asia to fight a war against the specter of the time – the specter of communism. However, this combination of a lack of real and tangible threat, coupled with the fact that

¹⁴ Gunther Lewy. "Vietnam: New Light on the Question of American Guilt." *Commentary*, 65, no. 2 (February 1978): 49.

so many Americans were dying for it, created a volatile climate. So, when photographs published in newspapers depicted the shameful acts of war rather than pride-inspiring acts of heroism, they only served to further galvanize public opposition to the conflict.



Fig. 1 - Co Rentmeester, *Getty Images*, October 1966

If 1965 was the year when America's political leaders made their full commitment to the war in Vietnam, it was also the year when the protest movement fully came together.¹⁵ Prior to 1965, public opposition was isolated to fringe activists and relatively ineffectual demonstrations. But as more troops were harvested from their homes to occupy the jungles of South



Fig. 2 - Unattributed, 1944

Vietnam, the many who opposed the war found a more legitimate voice. Nancy Zaroulis and George Sullivan, in their detailed chronicle of the protest movement, mark 1965 as

¹⁵ By May of 1965, there would be 50,000 American troops on the ground in South Vietnam. This dramatic increase was an attempt by Lyndon Johnson to “get things bubbling” after Vietcong aggression earlier in the year. Part of this ramped up aggression was the *Rolling Thunder* campaign advocated by National Security Advisor McGeorge Bundy. *Rolling Thunder* was a plan of continuous helicopter bombardment of the North Vietnamese encampments. See James S. Olsen and Randy Roberts. *Where the Domino Fell: America and Vietnam*. Revised 5th Edition. (Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2006): 128.

the moment of the watershed because “the events of that year contained all the elements for the drama that would be played again and again in the next seven years.”¹⁶

2.1 Standard Photographs

In many ways, and for much of the war before the Tet Offensive in 1968, photographs that were published by major news magazines conformed largely to the standard and predictable illustration of war. What is a so-called *standard* photograph? Can there be such a thing? Photographs depict events that by their very definition are unique to a time and to a place. But are all “events worthy of their name?”¹⁷

Consider Co Rentmeester’s October 1966 photograph of General Westmoreland inspecting the soldiers of the 1st Infantry Division (Fig. 1) against the iconic photograph of Lieutenant General George S. Patton reviewing his troops in 1944 (Fig. 2) near the end of World War II. Each depicts exactly the same type of “event:” the unity of the troops under the direct supervision of their highest ranked superiors. They are pictures of military might. They feature the strength of the numbers and the attentiveness of military leadership. They are the overwrought scenes in epic war movies when the heroic leader’s voice hurls an inspirational battle cry to the innumerable and excitable masses.

¹⁶ Zaroulis and Sullivan: 67.

¹⁷ “What is an event worthy of this name? And a major event that is, one that is actually more of an event, more actually an event than ever? An event that would bear witness, in an exemplary or hyperbolic fashion, to the very essence of an event or even to an event beyond essence? For could an event that still conforms to an essence, to a law or to a truth, indeed to a concept of the event, ever be a major event? A major event should be so unforeseeable and irruptive that it disturbs even the horizon of the concept or essence on the basis of which we believe we recognize an event as such. That is why all the “philosophical” questions remain open, perhaps even beyond philosophy itself, as soon as it is a matter of thinking the event.” Giovanna Borradori. *Philosophy in a Time of Terror: Dialogues with Jürgen Habermas and Jacques Derrida*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003): 90.

There are a few things worth noting in this photograph of Gen. Westmoreland. First, Westmoreland stands taller than everything else in the composition, even though a dramatic perspective does not overtly exaggerate his height. Second, the rigid dynamism of the verticals points to Westmoreland's thick forearm and fist. If this were a painting, it would be easy to assume that the artist was deliberately using these compositional devices as an allegory for Westmoreland's masculine power as a general. Lastly, all the arms of the soldiers mirror Westmoreland's. They share the rigidity and strength of his convictions. In this case, compositional devices project the image of an omnipotent commander, and the literal and figurative strength of arms.

In hindsight, we can recognize these as easily decipherable symbols, even naïve implications, considering the current historical understanding of the war in Vietnam. Some of the most significant military failures in Vietnam were directly related to the rigid structure and hierarchical organization that is accentuated in



Fig. 3 – Horst Faas, Associated Press, 1966

this photo. The jungle landscape and guerrilla enemy prevented a fortified assault by the kind of regimented troops that are congratulated in this photograph. In today's light, the normalcy of this photograph speaks to a fundamental misunderstanding of the nature of the Vietnam War in its early years.

Another example is Horst Faas' photograph of Gen. Westmoreland talking with troops near Ben Hoa in 1966 (Fig. 3). This is also a very standard photograph from the Vietnam War with respect to the history of war photographs. It participates in the common illustration of the common characters of war, fulfilling commonly accepted roles. Some might even go as far as to say that these are cliché photographs of war. They give no real context; they establish nothing exceptionally unique to time or even to place. They show the ways in which the Vietnam War was just like every other war.

These photographs, like the others, with our present day historical understanding, read as almost farcical. Westmoreland is discussing the war with ground troops here. The leaders of the war effort in Vietnam frequently considered reports from the troops negligible, and by the late '60s were roundly and routinely criticized in the press for that fact. In today's light, the normalcy of this photograph represents a fundamental misunderstanding of the nature of the Vietnam War in its early years rather than an accepted trope of war. Photographs that attempt to posit clichés of war onto actual wars misrepresent their nuanced and specific characters. That misrepresentation is fairly easy to see in cliché war photographs.

As early as January of 1968, the problematic fictions told to the public by the government were beginning to crumble. The now-notorious Tet Offensive was in full swing by the end of the month and Americans had suffered too many casualties in attempting to



Fig. 4 -
Unattributed,
LIFE Magazine,
1861

hold back the Vietcong guerillas, who, by the January 31, had already temporarily overrun the U.S. Embassy in Saigon.¹⁸ The paradoxical logic employed by U.S. military reports showed itself. Associated Press Correspondent Peter Arnett reported the oxymoron employed by an anonymous major to defend U.S. strategy: “It became necessary to destroy the town to save it.”¹⁹ Even prior to the major swing in public opinion, certain photo essays were subtly prescient of public sentiments to come. As *LIFE Magazine* put it recently, the photographers in Vietnam in the early 1960s were able to “[anticipate] the scope and the dire, lethal arc of the entire war in Vietnam.”²⁰

2.2 Exceptional Photographs

In one significant respect, many photographs broke from those simple, “standard,” conventional clichés of war photography even before 1968 by depicting the soldier as emotionally unprepared rather than stable and gallant.²¹



Fig. 5 - Larry Burrows, *LIFE Magazine*, 1965

Consider the photograph of Lance Corporal James C. Farley at the end of a photo essay, *One Ride With Yankee Papa 13*, shot for *LIFE Magazine* by Larry Burrows (Fig. 5).

There is no solidity here, no rigid strength of form to insinuate a rigid strength in

¹⁸ Nancy Zaroulis and Gerald Sullivan. *Who Spoke Up? American Protest Against the War in Vietnam, 1963 – 1975*. (Garden City, NY: Doubleday and Co, 1984): 150

¹⁹ As quoted in Zaroulis and Sullivan: 151.

²⁰ “Larry Burrows’ Classic Photo Essay: One Ride with Yankee Papa 13.” *LIFE Magazine*. Online. 2012. Accessed 19 March 2012. <http://life.time.com/history/one-ride-with-yankee-papa-13/#1>.

²¹ Looking back to the now-famous photograph of the youngest soldier who fought in the American Civil War, 10-year-old Johnny Clem still appears well suited for the task despite the probability of his emotional immaturity (Fig 4).

convictions like photographs of soldiers taking aim or regiments marching. Instead, there are collapsed diagonals – broken forms and despair.

Despite the fact that this was a conscientious and realistic portrait series of Farley, it still paints him as contrary to the archetypal soldier. He is shown as neither gallant nor brave, but instead as a child who, psychologically at least, does not belong in a war zone. This treatment of Farley speaks as a metaphor for the conflict at large. Americans prematurely rushed into a foreign country and were ill prepared for the type of war they were to encounter. Burrow's photographs of Farley personified this embarrassing circumstance.

A misconception about photographs of the Vietnam War is that they were exceptional simply because they depicted sadness, violence, and even the mangled bodies of the dead as opposed to hope and glory. However, the difference isn't simply a matter of polarity between positive photos and negative photos. Sadness, violence, death, despair – these have long been themes of photography, and most photographs exhibiting these themes aren't considered exceptional or iconic. In fact, rather than standing as metonyms for war, they were considered profane because they seemed to disturb the sanctity of death, or the honor of a soldier.

LIFE Magazine was permitted by government censors to print photographs of dead enemies (and dead Americans only a year later) as early as 1943, a quarter century



Fig. 6 - Robert Morse, *LIFE Magazine*, 1943

before the My Lai massacre. Robert Morse's photograph of the screaming skull of the Japanese soldier (Fig. 6) is the only photograph of an enemy dead that comes close to being culturally significant, and that cultural significance only has to do with the backlash from publishing the image that forced *LIFE* to defend its policy to disturbed readers. *LIFE* received letters from readers complaining about Morse's photograph, and responded, "War is unpleasant, cruel, and inhuman. It is more dangerous to forget this than to be shocked by reminders."²²

One important difference between photographs of the Vietnam War and photographs from previous wars was *how* the photographs presented death and pain – in the moment rather than after the fact. To partially explain this, Susan Moeller has made the connection between photojournalists working in Vietnam and the popularity of the street photographer aesthetic of the 1950s and 1960s practiced by Robert Frank, Lee Friedlander, and Gary Winograd: "Instead of careful compositions isolating decisive moments of combat, the images that seemed to dominate and characterize the bulk of the photographs from Vietnam appeared simply to arrest randomly selected scenes – random, yet all the more significant for their seeming representativeness precisely because they were 'random.'"²³ Although ultimately tainted by the photographer's subjectivity, shot-from-the-hip photographs are perceived as more authentically objective because of the lack of control over the image. The content is interpreted as being untainted by the photographer's intentions precisely because the photographer snapped the photograph spontaneously and without deliberate forethought.

²² "Letters to the Editors," *LIFE Magazine*. 22 February 1943, p. 8.

²³ Susan Moeller. *Shooting War: Photography and the American Experience of Combat*. (New York: Basic Books, 1989): 407.

Eddie Adams' famed photograph of Gen. Loan executing the Viet Cong prisoner (Fig. 7) is the quintessential photograph of the event being captured in the moment, rather than after the fact. It is the frozen moment, the mystical property of photography typified. This is not a photograph of death as an accomplished fact. It is a photograph of certain and impending death and of the agony in knowing death-is-to-come, but not yet. It was a specific event, an ugly event, and it was also a celebrated icon capable of characterizing the Vietnam War in general, despite its specificity. Why?



Fig. 7 - Eddie Adams, *Associated Press*, 1968

This face of death was self-reflective for much of the viewing public. It was as if, like Narcissus, they had finally recognized themselves in the image of the execution. They were horrified as the knowledge of their prolonged impotence was realized. When Thierry De Duve wrote of this photograph that viewer's experience was traumatic not because of the depiction of violence, but because of the "paradoxical conjunction of the here and the formerly," he meant that the viewer experienced being "always be too late, in real life, to witness the death of this poor man, let alone to prevent it; but by the same token, always be too early to witness the uncoiling of the tragedy, which at the surface of the photograph, will of course never occur."²⁴

²⁴ Thierry De Duve. "Exposure and Snapshot: The Photograph as Paradox." *October 5* (Summer 1978): 121.

When looking at this photograph contemporaneously, the slippage to the symbolic was inevitable. The viewers were too late to stop the violence of war in general, yet were frozen in hellish ineptitude and were unable to realize the true nature of its crisis, mirroring their inability to affect or accept the Vietcong's demise. At this point in 1968, experiencing the fallout from the Tet Offensive, Americans were at once passionately hopeful that they could make the war end, and hopelessly unable to end it. The same is true with all of those photographs that broke from precedent to symbolize Vietnam – they became iconic, because they mirrored and reinforced a preexisting public sentiment.



Fig. 8 - Unattributed, *German Federal Archive*, 1945



Fig. 9 - Art Workers Coalition, *And Babies* poster based on the photograph by Ron Haeberle, 1970

Another important way that Vietnam War photographs broke from precedent is that these images functioned in the sphere of culture. The photographs of the piles of dead from the aftermath of the Dresden bombings during WWII (Fig. 8), when published in the postwar world, drew cries of

outrage and accusations of indecency.²⁵ Photographs from My Lai on the other hand successfully made the massacre a *cause célèbre* for those who would condemn the war, despite their vulgarity. They were coopted as propaganda art.

Even in their time, the photographs from My Lai were quickly associated with timeless indictments of war. Shortly after the release of the photos, the Art Workers Coalition appropriated Ron

Haeberle's photograph from My Lai to act as a protest poster (Fig. 9).

Frazer Dougherty, Irving Petlin, and Jon Hendricks designed the poster to

illustrate a quote from an interview with CBS's Mike Wallace and Paul

Meadlo, a soldier who had taken part



Fig. 10 - Unattributed, *Associated Press*, 1970

in the massacre. Hovering above Haeberle's image of the bodies of Vietnamese peasants in the road, the poster reads "Q. And babies? A. And babies," indicating that not even the very young were spared from the brutality. The Museum of Modern Art had promised to fund the posters, but the board reversed their decision at the last minute in an effort to avoid the Vietnam War polemic. In protest, the Art Workers Coalition printed the posters with the help of the lithography union, stormed the museum, and displayed and distributed the posters beneath Picasso's *Guernica* (Fig. 10).²⁶

²⁵ For a recent example, see Luke Harding. "German historian provokes row over war photos." *The Guardian*. Online. 21 October 2003. Accessed 03 April 2012. <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2003/oct/21/artsandhumanities.germany>

²⁶ M. Paul Holsinger. *War and American Popular Culture*. (Greenwood Publishing Group, 1999): 363.

Photographs, in this way, are very tricky. There are two levels of trust that the public puts into photographs. One is in their denotation, the event depicted – that what is depicted is *what had been* as Roland Barthes famously termed it, and that the referent is actually what is signified by the photographic sign. However, the other contradicts the first almost entirely. Content frequently yields to connotation. The content of a photograph can be deemed untrustworthy. Perhaps for example, it excludes some significant factor from the frame. Nonetheless, the connotation attributed to that misleading content is frequently trusted, lasting.²⁷

Eddie Adam's photograph of the Vietcong execution is a prime example of the influence of connotation. Throughout his life, Adams felt he had framed the content in a way that led the viewer to sympathize with the wrong soldier. Margot Adler of National Public Radio explains in an article eulogizing Adam's life and career that he

considered himself a patriot and a Marine, [and] never came to terms with the fact that the anti-war movement saw that photograph as proof that the Vietnam War was unjustified. In fact, he believed to the end of his life that the picture only told part of the truth. The untold story was that on the day of the execution, an aid to Loan was killed by insurgents. After Loan pulled the trigger, he walked by Adams and said, "They killed many of our people and many of yours."²⁸

On the surface, the impact was positive because photographs from the Vietnam War helped to quicken the end of a war that cost countless lives. The impact is nonetheless problematic because when a photograph is translated from the specific, detailed, and eventful to the general, universal, and connoted; nuances are lost in the process of interpretation just as they were in cliché photographs. The thing depicted –

²⁸ Adler, Margot. "The Vietnam War, Through Eddie Adams Lens." *NPR.org*. March 24, 2009. <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=102112403> (accessed April 06, 2011).

soldiers as unsoldierly – also connoted war as horrible. In the process of making a generalized interpretation, there is also a laying of blame, and an implication of responsibility. If we see that war is horrible because we see soldiers



Fig. 11 - Peter Arnett, *Associated Press*, 1966

committing unsoldierly acts, it must be the soldiers who are making the war horrible. What is cut out of this circular reasoning is of utmost importance.

We consistently see the soldier-as-unsoldierly trope when looking at the celebrated, iconic photographs that illustrate the Vietnam War. In addition to being the year that marked an increased American military presence in Vietnam, 1965 was also defined by the first destruction of Vietnamese peasant hamlets by systematic burning. As these ethically questionable activities began, they were reported through the character of the soldier. Peter



Fig. 12 - Kyochi Sawada, *United Press International*, 1966

Arnett's photograph of the U.S. paratrooper walking away after torching a straw hut (Fig. 11) is interesting because of the paratrooper's cold, emotionless expression as he walks away from the flames. It represents the lack of consciousness with which operation "Scorched Earth" was executed.

Similarly, Kyoichi Sawada's photograph of a U.S. armored vehicle dragging the body of a Vietcong enemy through the streets (Fig. 12) is marked both by the horrible act and the soldiers who seem un-phased by the brutality of their behavior. The photograph, often called "Dusty Death," was taken in Tan Binh in late February of 1966 and was awarded a first prize for news in 1966 by *World Press Photo*. Tan Binh was not the site of a brutal struggle or a climactic battle in the war. The soldiers were sent there to build a road under operation "Rollingstone." They met opposition, but it was quickly squelched.

These soldiers took the site in the battle of Suoi Bong Trang on February 23 and 24. U.S. and Australian troops clashed with Vietcong guerillas, and, in keeping with typical Vietcong tactics, most of the Vietcong retreated into the wilderness once the fighting became heated. American casualties numbered 11, with 74 wounded, while the Vietcong lost at least 142 fighters.²⁹ Sawada snapped the photo in the aftermath of this battle. The Vietcong never attempted to retake the site, choosing instead to simply annoy Americans with occasional sniper and mortar fire. The road was completed by the beginning of March.³⁰ Without diminishing the gravity of the loss of lives, it is safe to say that this was a relatively routine and successful endeavor. At the very least, it was not the kind of endeavor that would warrant an especially acerbic animosity from the Americans.

And yet, Sawada's photograph shows U.S. soldiers unabashedly dragging the body of a Vietcong enemy through the street. Any image of a dead body speaks on some level to the horrors of war, but when this dead body is seen in conjunction with the soldiers nonchalance, the effect is even more chilling. The responsibility for perpetuating

²⁹ John Carland. *Combat Operations: Stemming the Tide, May 1965 to October 1966*. (Washington: Government Printing Office, 2000): 179 – 180.

³⁰ Carland. *Combat Operations...*: 179 – 180.

this kind of brutality falls on the two men driving the armored vehicle, regardless of their actual role. In the photograph, the parading of the corpse appears completely unwarranted. The armored vehicle looks large enough to tow a car, and it seems impractical to move a body in this way. The only conclusion left for the viewer to draw from this photograph is that these soldiers are needlessly violent and inhumane.

The same is true of Nick Ut's famous photograph of the naked, napalm burned Kim Phuc from 1972, much later in the war (Fig. 13). The presence of the strolling soldiers behind

the panicked children are what make the photograph an image of lapsed ethics and not just an image of a war horror. Robert Hariman and John Louis Lucaites share my diagnosis that the presence of indifferent soldiers in the image changes its rhetorical value. Of Ut's image, they wrote

The message is clear: what seems, from looking at the girl, to be a rare experience sure to evoke a compassionate response, is in fact, as experienced by the soldiers, something that happens again and again, so much so that the adults involved



Fig. 13 - Nick Ut, *Associated Press*, 1972



Fig. 14 - James Haddock, *Kim Phuc and other Vietnamese flee napalm (Trang Bang, Vietnam, 1972)*, Digital C-Print, 2000

(whether soldiers there or civilians in the United States) can become indifferent, morally diminished, capable of routinely doing awful things to other people.³¹

For these reasons, they find that the image of the napalmed girl strikes at a national nerve. While the uncensored rawness of the girls scream is jarring to the viewing public, the soldiers are featured as callous to her cries. The meaning of this photograph is interpreted and politically polarized based on the context.

John Haddock, an American digital artist, completed a series of so-called screenshots in 2001 that reconstruct historical events as if they were being played in a video game. His reconstruction of the events depicted in Ut's photograph also stresses the presence of the carefree soldiers (Fig. 14). Where the composition of Ut's photograph features Kim Phuc prominently, his screenshot from above allows the soldiers to dominate the frame. Hariman and Lucaites read the reconstructed image as Phuc running from the soldiers rather than from the pain of her burns.

2.3 Assigning Blame

By 1972 when Ut's image was taken and published, the public no longer had illusions about the direction the war had taken. The protest movement had become a prominent element in national news, especially since the Kent State shooting in May of 1970. But even before that, because of the worldwide protests in 1968, the American news media had shifted coverage to predominantly negative sentiments. Daniel Hallin noted that up until 1967, the press and the pro-war government rarely clashed. He found

³¹ Robert Hariman and John Louis Lucaites. *No Caption Needed: Iconic Photographs, Public Culture, and Liberal Democracy*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007): 180.

that not only was the media relatively “docile,” but that official positions on the war dominated the headlines.³² After 1968, however, coverage had shifted to “growing divisions in Washington, declining morale among American troops in the field, and the spread of the antiwar movement into parts of the political mainstream.”³³

It is hard not to look at any photograph from the Vietnam War as an anti-war photograph. Even at their most innocuous, a sense of hopelessness or futility lies behind photographs taken during the war in Vietnam. They are retroactively colored by the tainted cultural memory of the war. That tainted cultural memory is not just contingent upon the facts and results of the war, but upon images of war that portray it at its most egregious. These particularly damning photographs were not just inevitably connoted; they were also inevitably problematic. As the Winter Soldier Investigation attempted to clarify, soldiers were often unjustly blamed for the war crimes of the administration. Since the images functioned metonymically, the soldiers themselves signified and embodied the unjust nature of the war, and often were made to unfairly bear the burden of the war’s legacy upon returning.

This inappropriate blaming of the soldiers was noted by the press before the publication of what became the iconic photographs of Vietnam, but it did not stick until most of those major and damning photographs were published. This perception, this laying of blame, was not necessarily a situation that existed in a direct and causal way, but was rather assumed to exist by the polemicists battling for public opinion. The soldiers were involved because of the central position of the image of the soldier in the

³² Daniel C. Hallin. *The Uncensored War: the Media and Vietnam*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986): 162.

³³ Hallin: 163.

debates about the ethicality of the war. On one hand, soldiers did not appreciate being used. On the other, the anti-war movement was portrayed as being against the soldier.

“It became necessary to destroy the town in order to save it.” That particular sentiment would become utterly vile to most when news of the My Lai massacre broke in 1969. The event took place a mere two months after the anonymous Major’s assessment of Ben Tre. My Lai matched the memorable quote’s rhetoric with a more direct and blatant application of its implied strategy: to save the peasants from the tyranny of Hanoi’s communism, they must be slaughtered.

My Lai has become notorious only because of the photographs taken by U.S. Army Photographer Robert Haeberle. The story of the events that took place at My Lai was initially unheard until *LIFE Magazine* published Haeberle’s images after they surfaced in the *Cleveland Plain Dealer* some 18 months later.³⁴ During the Tet Offensive back in May of 1968, the Charlie Company had been sent into what they thought was a stronghold of enemy combatants in an area of the Quang Ngai province, named “Pinkville” by the U.S. military. When the soldiers arrived and found only civilians, they slaughtered them – an estimated 350-500 people.

The photographs are unique specimens because they provide such a comprehensive record of the carnage. But again, the photographs did not just depict the aftermath of violence. It is important to note that the photographs were of soldiers caught red-handed as agents of that violence. Haeberle didn’t just photograph the now-infamous bodies in the street that was appropriated by the Art Workers’ Coalition for their *And Babies* poster. Interspersed among the graphic images of slain civilians are photographs

³⁴ *American Experience*: 22-23.

of soldiers acting destructively. As the number of bloody bodies in the photographs increased, images of soldiers are slipped in between, showing them ravaging the village (Fig. 15). One photograph features two soldiers dumping domestic possessions into a muddy ditch. Another shows a soldier lighting the grass roof of a domicile on fire. A third pictures a soldier dramatically hurling round thatched mats into the already burning structure. The last and possibly most disturbing image is of the soldiers in the Charlie Company enjoying a break after the destruction of the entire village.



Fig. 15 - Page 4 of the *Cleveland Plain Dealer*, November 20, 1969

Historian James Olsen remarked that these photographs have become “ubiquitous” in that they “symbolize evil.”³⁵ Images like these alter the identity of the soldier in American culture’s collective memory. The soldier as a character is obviously no longer a hero fighting for American ideals. Moreover, the soldier was not even an ineffectual and unprepared child, like Farley in Burrow’s series. He has become, for Olsen and others, the personification of the evils of war rather than the embodiment of its glories.

³⁵ *American Experience: My Lai*. DVD. Directed by Barak Goodman. (Public Broadcasting Service, 2010).

When John Smail, one of the squad leaders of the Charlie Company who was responsible for the events, overheard the news break about My Lai, he feared for his safety. The patrons of the bar in which he was sitting were screaming “fucking baby killers” at the television.³⁶ This image conjured by Smail became a common trope in the final years of the war and in the years that followed. In the case of specific soldiers like Smail who had committed those crimes, they were coopted to symbolize the despicable qualities of the war at large. Keith Beattie, in *The Scar that Binds*, ties the cultural understanding of the veteran with wild violence (exhibited in such movies as *Taxi Driver*, 1976, and *Rambo: First Blood*, 1982) because “[since] the violence at My Lai was so excessive – so outside acceptable or accepted boundaries (even in war), and was therefore determinably insane, [it] opened the way for a further demonization of the veteran as mentally deranged and psychotic.”³⁷ The soldier’s reputation in general, on some level, was utterly despicable, since he or she was held responsible for all of the atrocities shown photographically in the news. This was problematic for two reasons.

First, attacks levied did not discriminate. Regardless of whether an individual actually participated in such crimes, he or she was often hastily blamed for the horrors of war in general. Mike Cook, one of the veterans featured in the documentary *Vietnam: Homecoming* (2007), remembers being harassed excessively upon returning back to the U.S., despite being innocent of any serious war crimes: “When we drove out [of] the gate, there were people yelling and screaming and throwing crap at the bus – I mean literally crap at the bus. You could hear them yelling and screaming, and it wasn’t ‘welcome home,’ it was ‘S.O.B.,’ ‘babykillers.’ They told us when we debarked the bus,

³⁶ *American Experience...*

³⁷ Beattie: 65.

‘Don’t tell anyone where you came from, keep it to yourself. Go home and enjoy your family.’”³⁸ The protesters in this case attacked Cook as if he were the problematic aspects of the war incarnated before their very eyes.

This hostility is something that at least a number of soldiers returning from Vietnam experienced as justified. Others, however, experienced the hostility as unjustified because they were condemned based on a misplaced assumption. The problem with this hostility and symbolization was not just that some soldiers were mischaracterized as violent when they were guilty of no wrongdoing. The problem is that others, namely government and military officials responsible for giving the orders to the soldiers to commit violent acts, were not held responsible in part because they avoided becoming symbols in the public eye of wrong doing.

For three days in Detroit in 1971, the *Vietnam Veterans Against the War* held a forum discussing precisely this unbalanced assignment of guilt. The *New York Times* reported on the conference, calling attention to the general sentiments of the forum. About 100 veterans showed up to confess that they had frequently witnessed what would be called war atrocities: the torturing of soldiers, the killing of civilians, and the mutilation of corpses.³⁹ They, however, did not feel they should be held responsible for such actions, because the military leadership designed the strategy that perpetuated these kinds of activities. “We’re passing the buck and a certain number of the cents of that

³⁸ *Vietnam: A Televised History*. DVD. The History Channel. (New York: A&E Home Video, 2007): 00:17:30 – 00:18:30.

³⁹ Jerry M. Flint. “Veterans Assess Atrocity Blame: 100 who served in Vietnam hold leaders at fault.” *The New York Times*. 07 February 1971

dollar belong to us,” said Kenneth Campbell, “but the people who make the policy should be the first to burn.”⁴⁰

Second, despite the fact that many activists rallied around images like those from the My Lai massacre, most people within the anti-war movement were not specifically against soldiers, and actual incidents in which soldiers shared Cook’s experience were few. Some of the most fervent supporters for withdrawal from Vietnam were those who had been there to witness the events first hand. However, that did not stop politicians, activists, and news organizations from arguing their position with the soldier’s embattled identity in mind. This is the second problematic aspect of photographic metonymy. The officials who were actually responsible for perpetuating the continued hurtfulness of war, those who gave the orders for destruction of villages and burning of hamlets, had a scapegoat, and it was a scapegoat they could successfully defend.

On one level, it should not be surprising that many came to conflate the inhumanity of war with the inhumanity of those who took part in it. In so many of the iconic images from Vietnam, the American soldiers, or more often their South Vietnamese allies, are implicated in the ethically-questionable actions or outright atrocious acts. Since soldiers have always been associated with war, they became the body politick upon which the ethicality of the war was argued. Nonetheless, the relationship between photographs and the public that commends or disparages them is not simple or consistent.

The nuances of the issue were not lost on U.S. Vice President and war proponent Spiro Agnew. In April of 1971, Agnew made a speech at the 25th anniversary meeting of

⁴⁰ Flint. “Veterans Assess Atrocity Blame...”

the Veterans Administration Volunteer Service. Selections from that speech were reproduced in the *Wisconsin State Journal*. In that speech, Agnew said that war critics were unjustly criticizing American soldiers. He not only said that this criticism was unwarranted. Agnew also went as far as to say that these critics were “demoralizing Americans on the front lines.”⁴¹ As if in deliberate reinforcement of the pro-war U.S. government’s attempt to align itself against the anti-war movement via condemnation of its supposed demonization of soldiers, the facing page reports Lt. Calley’s remarkably light sentence for his part in the orchestration of the My Lai massacre – a point of heated contention among war protestors.

This critique of the anti-war movement may have been hypocritical, but was nonetheless quite effective. It was hypocritical because the U.S. government notoriously neglected Vietnam War veterans after the war, so they defended the respectability of the soldier in rhetoric only.⁴² The critique was effective because it exposed the war protest in

⁴¹ “Agnew Lashes ‘Negative’ Critics of War Effort.” *Wisconsin State Journal*. 04 April 1971: 4.

⁴² Numerous news agencies reported that veterans were being forgotten by the government agencies that were supposed to honor and care for them after they committed and sacrificed themselves for the national cause. In 1973, as Kissinger’s drawdown was taking place and veterans were returning home, they found themselves already forgotten, or perhaps not-yet-remembered—the level of compensation they were promised for their efforts was nowhere to be found. Peter Breastup reported “The Veterans Administration spends only 15 percent of its \$12 billion budget on ex-GIs who actually served in Vietnam, shortchanging them on education, jobs, and drug help.” Likewise a *Newsweek* correspondent reported “Vietnam vets are hoeing a tougher road than their counterparts from any American war in this century.” *TIME*, in keeping with this trend wrote, “Veterans of World War II returned to a grateful, generous country that was about to embark on an unprecedented quarter-century of prosperity. Korean War veterans cashed in on much the same rising curve of material benefits. Viet Nam vets, by contrast, are the dubious beneficiaries of the nation’s immediate troubled past and uneasy future.” See Peter Breastup. “Viet Combat G. I.’s Held Shortchanged.” *The Washington Post*. 04 March 1973, “The Vets: Heroes as Orphans,” *Newsweek*. 05 March 1973., “VETERANS: Forgotten Warriors?” *TIME Magazine*. 12 March 1973.

general as depending largely upon the image of the soldier as tragic and malignant, all the while deflecting the critique away from the higher levels of command.

In an article for the November 17, 1969 issue of the *New York Times*, Nan Robertson approached the very point of potency in Agnew's claims: are wounded pro-war veterans embittered by war critics? Robertson interviewed several veterans recovering from their wounds at Walter Reed Army Medical Center.⁴³ She characterized them as proud and appreciative of the experience of war for maturing them. She also says that these same men she interviewed largely felt no hostility towards the anti-war movement. While none truly agreed with the anti-war movement's message, most felt the protesters were in some way honoring the soldiers' sacrifice. One veteran, Staff Sergeant Barry Baron, went as far as to say, "One reason we are fighting in Vietnam is so that people can have long hair and beards and protest the war in Vietnam."⁴⁴ While there is factual merit to instances of the veterans being harassed by the anti-war protestors, the inflation of its prevalence into a binary of pro-war veterans/anti-veteran protestors is nonetheless a distortion.

Interestingly, Robertson found that the thing about which these men felt most insulted was a more officially-sanctioned rhetoric of war protest. Captain Corbin Cherry, a chaplain in the war, was quoted as saying, "I'm with that lady that promises to sue the moratorium if they read her son's name again. Thousands and thousands of parents who lost children don't appreciate their names being read."⁴⁵ Apparently, these veterans did not really find either particular polarization of ideology demoralizing or despicable, be it

⁴³ Nan Robertson. "Wounded Unembittered by War Critics." *The New York Times*. 15 November 1969.

⁴⁴ Robertson. "Wounded Unembittered by War Critics."

⁴⁵ Robertson. "Wounded Umembittered by War Critics."

left wing protest or right wing warmongering. They did, however, find the practice of utilizing the war dead to make points about the ethicality of war to be reprehensible.

The opinion of those soldiers casts projects like *LIFE Magazine's* "One Week's Dead" in an entirely different light (Fig. 16). Although the editors of *LIFE*



Fig. 16 - One Weeks Dead, *LIFE Magazine*, June 03, 1969

made an attempt at impartiality while claiming that they could "not speak for the dead," the intention of showing the portraits of hundreds of men who had died during the week of May 28-June 3, 1969, was obviously aligned with a kind of humanistic argument for withdrawal from Vietnam. If this was not evident in the pages of "One Week's Dead," it was easily divined from the testimonial immediately following, which recounted the story of one such photograph as symbolic of a "broader tragedy."⁴⁶ While the warmongering right appropriated the disgraced veteran as a symbolic tool to define the war in its terms – as slowly derailed by lack of support and eventually sabotaged by outright resistance, the protesting left coopted the war dead to illustrate the scale of what they considered a tragedy. In either

⁴⁶ Unattributed. "I see death coming up a hill," *TIME Magazine*. June 27, 1969: 32.

case, the soldiers are usurped into a struggle of ideology that mischaracterizes them for political gain.

While certainly the photographs cannot be perceived as solely responsible for the subsuming the soldier into the body



Fig. 17 - Mike Kamber, 2007

politic in the aftermath of Vietnam, we cannot underestimate the role of Vietnam War photographs in shaping images like Mike Kamber's – photographs of soldiers threatening the photographer with weapons (Fig. 17). No soldier wants to be the poster boy for the brutality of war. Since the photographs from Vietnam, it is not hard to see a heightened awareness of the power of damning images looming behind every aimed camera.

CHAPTER 3. INVENTING HEROES – IRAQ AND AFGHANISTAN:

PHOTOGRAPHY'S TOTEMS AND TABOOS

After scanning the public photo archives of the US Department of Defense for weeks, bloggers Norman Beierle and Hester Keijser discovered a silly trend:

Apart from the relative invisibility of the “enemy” combatants, the wounded and the dead—after all, we are staring at the corporate face of the DoD—a number of categories start to present themselves quite naturally. Among them, I found the set of sunset soldiers probably one of the most puzzling ones. The army has a great love for the silhouetted image.⁴⁷

It should come as no surprise that these photographs, and ones of similar picturesque quality, were the ones to wind up on the U.S. Department of Defense website. It would be foolish to browse the public face of the military looking for anything less than a romanticized picture of military life. All of these images are free to download at high resolution, sowing advertisements for the military into the hard drive of whoever on the Internet finds the images worth downloading.

Mishka Henner, in his explorations of the U.S. Department of Defense website, finds other somewhat expected trends in the archives, exposing what he called a “sphere of legitimate aesthetics” through which the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan are being presented: “Empire Sunsets (or what Beierle and Keijser called sunset soldiers),” “The Friend (soldiers extending their hands to children),” and “The Healer (military doctors treating sick civilians).”⁴⁸ All of these images, even at first glance, render a pleasant and

⁴⁷ Norman Beierle and Hester Keijser. “Sunset Soldiers.” *Mrs. Deane*. 24 February 2011. Accessed 07 November 2011. <http://www.beikey.net/mrs-deane/?p=4845>.

⁴⁸ As quoted in David Campbell. “Vietnam, Afghanistan and the sphere of legitimate aesthetics: developing a critical photographic practice.” *David Campbell: Photography*,

agreeable image of U.S. soldiers and of the counter insurgency conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan. Again, this is not a surprising discovery.

What should be a surprising discovery is the fact that these trends continue when the search is shifted from the official propaganda of the U.S. Department of Defense to the photojournalism of some of the major news organizations in the western world. The archives of most major news organizations seem to follow these same trends of romanticizing soldier life. This attitude is altogether desirable for those who would seek public approval of the wars. But for those seeking a legitimate reportage of context to the wars, a “legitimate sphere of aesthetics” is hardly convincing as an objective record. What is the “legitimate sphere of aesthetics” in photojournalism with respect to the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, and what is its relationship to Vietnam War photography?

Throughout almost the entire wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, there has been a continuous desire on the part of the press and politicians to draw the comparisons among the wars in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Vietnam. There are certainly very obvious similarities. Both the Vietnam War and the war in Afghanistan were counter insurgency conflicts in pre-modernized countries. As I indicated in the introduction, both the Vietnam War and the Iraq War share an arc of public opinion, particularly with respect to the introduction of atrocity photographs. But with respect to photojournalism, the Vietnam War and the recent wars in the Middle East are not very similar.

Much of the iconic photography that brought us tragic visions of the Vietnam War was a result of the freedom granted to photojournalists to roam about Vietnam relatively unencumbered. Eddie Adams characterized his experience in an interview reproduced in

Multimedia, Politics. 13 May 2011. Accessed 07 November 2011. <http://www.david-campbell.org/2011/05/13/vietnam-afghanistan-aesthetics-critical-photography/>.

the film “An Unlikely Weapon.” He said, “There was a hardcore group of people in Vietnam. Especially photographers, who have probably seen more war than any soldier or any general, and I don’t care who they are... We would go to all the battles.”⁴⁹

Contrast those words for a moment against Rick Loomis’ words, a photographer from the *LA Times* who shot the wars Iraq and Afghanistan. He said, at a World Press Photo conference at USC Annenberg, “The front line, or as the Marines like to call it, the tip of the spear, would change from day to day... One day, you think, *okay here I am, it’s the front, and it seems dangerous...* and the next day you see boats going by on semi-trucks, and you think *this can’t be the tip of the spear, where am I now?*... It’s totally unknown to you, because once you’re in with a unit, you’re in and you don’t have a lot of mobility.”⁵⁰ What Loomis is describing here is the Pentagon policy of embedding journalists with certain groups of soldiers for their protection, discussed above as responsible for the so-called photojournalistic Stockholm syndrome.

The American soldier is indeed a well-established character in the history of photography. But the problem with this character is that, after Vietnam, the soldier fell from grace. It was not simply because soldiers during the Vietnam War were sometimes pictured as a malignant presence, blindly muddling problems that were not their own. It was also because, long since all the photo opportunities in Vietnam had ended, the American soldier has been used to tell the unfavorable story of the Vietnam War. Since the tragedy of the Vietnam War became associated with the face of the soldier, the image

⁴⁹ Susan Morgan Cooper, dir. *An Unlikely Weapon: The Eddie Adams Story*. Morgan Cooper Productions, 2009.

⁵⁰ Rick Loomis. “The Iraq War, Iraq: One Year Later, Making Choices.” (presented at the World Press Photo Panel Discussion *Images of Crisis, Crisis of Images* at USC Annenberg.) January 13, 2005.

of the soldier was problematic for those who would seek to tell a favorable story, to garner support for the efforts in Iraq and Afghanistan.

As I suggested with the example of the Sunset Soldiers, many of the photographs from Iraq and Afghanistan overcompensate for the negative image established by the Vietnam War; the Sunset Soldiers deliberately romanticize soldier life for fear of inadvertently condemning it. In Vietnam, photojournalists were able to accurately reflect declining public support of the war with images that were increasingly critical of war practices. However, the legacy of these maligning images lingered. Policy that was inspired by that legacy prevented embedded photojournalists in Iraq and Afghanistan from being able to accurately reflect and cater to the waning public with regard to the ethics of those wars.

When considering the course of the Vietnam War and the kinds of images that were produced as anti-war sentiments grew, it is evident that the photographs shared a symbiotic relationship with the movement. Critical images were created in a climate of dissent, and then, by their existence in the cultural milieu, fomented further dissent. When the “Support our Troops” cult of the soldier rhetoric emerged at the onset of first the war in Afghanistan then the Iraq War, it reads as an attempt to prevent criticism of the war via the actions of the soldiers – practices that were widely used in the Vietnam era. I consider the term Sunset Soldiers, in this light, as a euphemism for the overwhelmingly generic and congratulatory photographs that flood the newspapers from the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Many of the photographs from the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan share iconographical similarities with the more everyday photographs from Vietnam. One

theme, for example, from all three wars was the wounded soldier – the soldier as victim. This theme was explored by Burrows in *One Ride with Yankee Papa 13*, as discussed in the previous section. The idea of these photographs is that we relate to the war through an empathetic reaction to the transgressed subject. When we look into the faces of the troubled soldiers, we experience their emotion mirrored onto us.

This is why most of the iconic images from the Vietnam War were considered anti-war photographs. The photographs' content were

organized in such a way that they encouraged the viewer to relate to characters who were supposed to be our enemies. That is the case with Ut's photograph of Kim Phuc. When soldiers were pictured, they were cold and amoral. The photographs that often did depict the soldier were tragedies, like *One Ride with Yankee Papa 13*, and cultivated hopelessness, which revealed an anti-war stance. Henri Huet's photograph of the two soldiers with head bandages during a battle in the Central Highlands in January of 1966 is another such photo (Fig. 18). The wounded soldiers reach out like zombies in abjection and despair.

Perhaps part of the reason why photographs of wounded soldiers in Vietnam appear to express a sense of hopelessness and meaninglessness is because there was no real initial trauma to justify their presence in Vietnam. This is, of course, not the case



Fig. 18 - Henri Huet, *LIFE Magazine*, 1966

with the war in Afghanistan. Marvin and Deborah Kalb wrote that presidents before Bush II were reluctant to enter into a so-called “boots on the ground” conflict because, since Vietnam, they feared the emptiness of morale that followed when hardship was endured without legitimate motivation. But, like Dick Cheney said, everything changed after 9/11. President Bush took 9/11 as the ultimate justification to enter a foreign war. “You’ve got to take 9/11 and smack it down right in the middle of it, it was the dominant...development that overwhelmed everything.”⁵¹ Until 9/11, American war policy had been especially tentative. But afterward, Marvin and Deborah Kalb suggested that the Bush administration felt they could “no longer shilly-shally through a crisis. It could no longer lose another war. It could no longer be humiliated. It had to be tough, and if challenged, it had to meet the challenge and emerge triumphant for the world to see.”⁵²

As the Kalbs’ language implies, in order to try and escape the Vietnam War’s dreadful historical wake, the Bush administration employed a strategy and rhetoric of inflated bravado. This is the initial source of what I have called the cult of the soldier, or what Jeff Stein termed the “Hero Syndrome.” He noticed that the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, like Vietnam, are counter-insurgency conflicts, and are conducted as a systematic liquidation of enemy combatants, necessarily outside the eyes of the public. The killing is just too vicious. Retired U.S. Army Major John Nagle has remarked that the U.S.-run Kill/Capture missions that dominate the offensive in the Middle East is “almost an industrial-scale counter-terrorism killing machine.”⁵³ Jeff Stein, after relating

⁵¹ As quoted in Marvin and Deborah Kalb: 204

⁵² Marvin and Deborah Kalb: 205.

⁵³ Dan Edge. Dir. “Kill/Capture.” *PBS Frontline*. Transcript. Online. 14 October 2011. Accessed 30 November 2011. <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/afghanistan-pakistan/kill-capture/transcript/> .

Kill/Capture to the Phoenix program during Vietnam, reminded the reader that “counterinsurgency doesn’t lend itself to Homeric heroes...victories are short, dirty, ambiguous, morally questionable, and often inconsequential. From the muck of the war on terror, heroes have to be invented.”⁵⁴ Photography can be used to “invent heroes” just as it “symbolized evil” in Vietnam.

It is important at this point to distinguish between the Iraq War and the Afghanistan War. The war in Afghanistan was initially meant to oust the Taliban government that implicitly supported terrorism by refusing to hand over Al Qaeda leaders. After the Taliban was removed from sovereignty, the war in Afghanistan became a counter-insurgency operation, preventing a Taliban coup against the Karzai administration, while searching out Taliban and Al Qaeda guerillas and bases in the countryside. The war in Iraq was meant to liberate the Iraqi people from Saddam Hussein’s dictatorship, while locating and destroying his alleged weapons of mass destruction. However, the war in Afghanistan has been dramatically more popular than the war in Iraq. Gallup poles show that until recently the public felt that the U.S. was justified in its continued presence in Afghanistan.⁵⁵ In Iraq, on the other hand, public opinion dropped dramatically as early as 2005, at a rate faster than the decline of public support for Vietnam.⁵⁶

⁵⁴ Jeff Stein. “Beyond the Hero Syndrome: Why the initial accounts of the bin Laden raid had a familiar sounding spin.” *Bookforum*. Volume 18, Issue 02. (New York: ARTFORUM International Magazine, 2011): 7.

⁵⁵ Jeffrey Jones. “New High Call Afghanistan War a Mistake.” *Gallup*. Online. 03 August 2010. Accessed 01 December 2011. <http://www.gallup.com/poll/141716/new-high-call-afghanistan-war-mistake.aspx>.

⁵⁶ Frank Newport and Joseph Carol. “Iraq Versus Vietnam, a Comparison of Public Opinion.” *Gallup*. Online. 24 August 2005. Accessed 01 December 2011. <http://www.gallup.com/poll/18097/iraq-versus-vietnam-comparison-public-opinion.aspx>

Where the Iraq War was aimed at a clearly definable photographable menace (Hussein), the war in Afghanistan had more in common with the war in Vietnam in that the enemy was diffuse. With the Vietnam War and the war in Afghanistan, the U.S. was battling abstractions – with the Vietnam



Fig. 19 - Tyler Hicks, *The New York Times*, 2001

War, the insidious disease of Soviet Communism in the jungles of Southeast Asia, and with the war in Afghanistan, the threat of terror in the foothills of the Middle East. However, unlike both the Iraq War and the Vietnam War, the war in Afghanistan had an initial cause to underscore the necessity of war: 9/11. It could be suggested that Osama bin Laden was the target, but bin Laden was not as substantial a figure as Hussein, simply because after 9/11 with a few minor (video) exceptions, he seemed to disappear into the caves, and until 2011 when he was killed, he was almost forgotten while the war waged on.

3.1 Afghanistan

Arguably the most iconic photograph to emerge out of the immediate post-9/11 stage of the war in Afghanistan was Tyler Hicks' photograph of the Taliban execution (Fig. 19). The exceptional thing about Tyler Hicks' photographs of the U.S. and Northern Alliance effort to oust the Taliban from their strongholds in Afghanistan in 2001 was that Hicks sensed the impending war after 9/11 and made it into Afghanistan before the

borders were closed.⁵⁷ That means he was able to enter the country without being subject to an embed, and before his photographs were required to be inspected by unit commanders.

Hicks' photograph captures vengeance in the moment of execution. It could be compared to Eddie Adams photograph of Gen. Loan. However, where Loan appeared to kill with a cold indifference, the Northern Alliance fighters killed with a heated, almost fetishized desire for the enemy's blood. These elements of fetish and desire are pictured in the energy of the executioners who almost hungrily fire guns into the lone Taliban soldier. These sentiments are reified and accentuated by the Taliban resistor's naked legs. The scene may be of an execution by firing squad, but it reads like a gang rape, right down to the bloodied pants hanging around his ankles.

Hicks' photo series, the images from which culminated in depicting the execution of the Taliban soldier, won a World Press Photo award in 2001, just like Adams' photograph did in 1969. However, despite the poignancy of both photographs, Hicks' photograph eerily matched the aggravated pro-war sentiments because of its proximity to 9/11 and the heightened rage of national discourse in 9/11's wake. Where Adams' photograph cultivated disdain for war and matched the anti-war rhetoric, Hicks' photograph matched what Jasbir K. Puar called the "eager proliferation of homophobic-racist images" in America after 9/11, some of which appeared in New York only days

⁵⁷ In an interview with Brian Lockhart, Hicks said that after 9/11 he predicted the impending war and knew that "There's a period of time when you can get in, then the borders are closed off." He went on to say that after 9/11, he "basically just got on a plane and went." As quoted in Brian Lockhart. "Our 2004 interview with missing NYTimes journalist Tyler Hicks." *Political Capitol Blog*. 17 March 2011. Accessed 16 March 2012. <http://blog.ctnews.com/politicalcapitol/2011/03/17/our-2004-interview-with-missing-nytimes-journalist-tyler-hicks/>.

after the attacks “depicting a turbaned caricature of Osama bin Laden being anally penetrated by the Empire State Building.”⁵⁸

The presence of a first cause, a first impetus in the form of an event (9/11) that justifies reactionary violence and even the pain of sacrifice, is what distinguishes not only this photograph from its historical counterparts from the Vietnam War, but many other more standard photographs as well. The events of 9/11 interrupted the historical understanding of



Fig. 20 - Mike Yoder, *Journal World*, 2001



Fig. 21 - Tim Hetherington, *Sleeping Soldier Doc Kelso*, 2007

photographs with a renewed, reversed context just as photographs from the Vietnam War subverted the image of the soldier into a renewed, reversed context.

Despite the few dead bodies pictured in photographs from 9/11, there were many photographs of live bodies taken that exemplify traumatic victimhood. This is the case with the photographs of men and women watching the events of 9/11 unfold, teary-eyed and glued to the nearest television. They reaffirm and justify the emotional response to the tragedy by appearing to objectify the condition of mourning. They show the viewer of

⁵⁸ Jasbir K. Puar. *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times*. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007): 37.

the photograph to himself or herself through the face of the other, exemplifying the uniting, grief-affirming similarities.

The photograph acts as a mirror. It says, yes, you and I are the victims of 9/11.

As compared to the images of shocked 9/11 mourners (Fig. 20), it is clear that the victimizing mirror format in general was not an isolated iconographical or compositional theme in photographs of the war in

Afghanistan after the embedding policy went into effect. While images at once reaffirmed the same bravado that the Bush administration harnessed from the backlash of 9/11, they also confirmed that the wounds of 9/11 were still fresh. In order to justify war, it must both appear winnable and just. Bush's "dead or alive" mantra,

like Toby Kieth's punch line, "we'll put a boot in your ass, it's the American way," reinforce the sentiment of winability, while the slogan that christens 9/11 remembrance celebrations, "never forget," keeps the wounds open. While the specter of Vietnam



Fig. 22 - Cover of the April 02, 2006 issue of the *Los Angeles Times* featuring a photograph by Rick Loomis



Fig. 23 - James Nachtwey, *TIME Magazine*, 2011

lingers in images as an overcompensation attempting to avoid the prospect of losing, 9/11 haunts them with a kind of ceaseless victimization of these so-called heroes.

Most demurely perhaps, this is seen in Tim Hetherington's *Sleeping Soldiers* (2007-8) series from his trip into the Korengal Valley of Afghanistan, through which he portrays the American soldier not as a valiant and patriotic champion, but as a fragile child enduring grave hardship – a victim of some unknown nightmare (Fig. 21).

Nonetheless, unlike Burrow's photographs of Farley, these photographs picture the soldier as unassumingly heroic in that they are victims of necessity, avenging 9/11 in spite of the psychological pain they incur as a result. While they depict victimhood, this victimhood is not without hope. These images are tinged with an optimistic heroism.

In a much more physical way, the victims of enemy violence are pictured in Rick Loomis' series called *Lifeline* (2006), which he produced for the *Los Angeles Times* (Fig. 22). The images are graphic; most are bloody. These soldiers were seriously wounded in Afghanistan, and the only thing that seems to make them tolerable to the viewer is the vitality left in their eyes,



Fig. 24 - Louie Palu, *The Toronto Star*, 2011



Fig. 25 - Tyler Hicks, *The New York Times*, 2011

as if the American spirit can never die. In the end, these are pictures of Americans who are, yes, wounded, but more importantly are overcoming the hardships of the war with state of the art medical technology.

The consistency and monotony of these kinds of soldier images is ostensible. Michael Shaw, of *BagNewsNotes.com*, points out how three of the industry's best photographers were sent by three of the world's largest news organizations to get photographs that give context to the war in Afghanistan. What was the result? Each organization published nearly the same photograph, from the three different photographers within two weeks (Fig. 23 - 25). "Not to take anything away from the thoroughly accomplished James Nachtwey, Louie Palu, and Tyler Hicks, but what does it tell us that *TIME*, *The Toronto Star*, and *The New York Times* all offered us powerful, dramatic, and overlapping photo-stories of U.S. medevac teams saving U.S and Afghan lives via helicopter 'missions of mercy.'"⁵⁹ These images have historical matches. Photo archives from the war in Vietnam are peppered with helicopter rescues as well as soldiers receiving medical treatment. Beyond that similarity, there are differences.



Fig. 26 - Cover of the April 16, 1965 issue of *LIFE Magazine* featuring photograph by Larry Burrows

⁵⁹ Shaw, Michael. "Big Media Sent 3 Of My Favorite War Photographers to Afghanistan And What They Brought Back Were The Near-Same Medevac Shots." *BagNews*, January 16, 2011, accessed August 29, 2011. <http://www.bagnewsnotes.com/2011/01/big-media-sent-3-of-my-favorite-war-photographers-to-afghanistan-and-what-they-brought-me-back-were-the-near-same-medevac-shots/>

Compare Tyler Hicks' photograph to one of Larry Burrows' from *One Ride with Yankee Papa 13*, which ran on the cover of *LIFE* (Fig. 26). The soldier in Hicks' photograph confidently reassures the viewer that everything is a-okay even though someone was hurt. On the other hand,



Fig. 27 - David Guttenfelder, *Associated Press*, 2009

Burrows photographed Farley in a moment of weakness, exhibiting fear and insecurity. So in one instance, the Hicks photograph is an image of victimization because one of the characters appears to be badly wounded. But more importantly, front and center is his rescuer, acting heroically in the time of tragedy. If there was a frame when Burrows caught Farley in a moment of confidence, it didn't make it to print. Likewise, if Hicks photographed this unnamed soldier in a moment of fear, it did not make the cut. This is a complete ideological reversal.

A number of other photographs share this encouraging, a-okay mentality without being so boisterously heroic. One of the most celebrated photographs from the war in Afghanistan was taken by David Guttenfelder in the Korengal Valley. Of the photograph, David Dunlap writes on *The New York Times* photography blog that while looking over the top searches on *The New York Times* website for the week of May 18, 2009, "something strange popped up in the No. 10 position: pink boxers."⁶⁰ This photograph,

⁶⁰ David W. Dunlap. "Behind the Scenes: Man in the Pink Boxers." *The New York Times LENS Blog: Photography, Video, and Visual Journalism*. Online. 21 May 2009. Accessed

which graced the cover of *The New York Times*' printed edition, features Specialist Zachary Boyd standing alongside two other soldiers (Fig. 27). All three soldiers are aiming their rifles into the mountainous landscape from behind a barricade, but only two of the soldiers are fully dressed. Boyd is pictured wearing only a red t-shirt, his helmet, a backpack, and a pair of pink "I Love NY" boxer shorts.

This image is significant beyond its levity. It pictures the soldiers living very normal lives even though they are at war. Despite being at one of the most dangerous military bases in Afghanistan, Boyd still finds himself able to lounge around in his underwear. This ability to lounge is reassuring because although the soldiers are being fired upon, they still on some level are pictured enjoying the comforts of home. Not to mention the fact that the print of his underwear reminds the viewer for the reason why Boyd must wake up early to fire his gun in Afghanistan: 9/11.



Fig. 28 - Erik de Castor, *Reuters*, 2011

This casual representation of the goings on in the Korengal Valley is also a bit misleading considering the reputation of the base. The Korengal Valley is relatively isolated from the other military bases in Afghanistan, and it sits between two mountainous ridges occupied by the Taliban insurgents. The base, Restrepo, is set in the very center of this valley,

30 November 2011. <http://lens.blogs.nytimes.com/2009/05/21/behind-the-scenes-man-in-the-pink-boxers/>

along an old mujahedeen trail.⁶¹ Sebastian Junger wrote that the valley “is widely considered to be the most dangerous valley in northeastern Afghanistan” and that “men have been shot while asleep in their barracks tents.”⁶² Boyd clearly was able to avoid this danger despite his level of comfort. Regardless, the tone of the photograph suggests the ease and comfort of a Sunday on the couch rather than a firefight in the most dangerous valley in Afghanistan.

John Lucaites sees a similar sentiment in the often-published photographs of soldiers practicing good hygiene. Erik de Castro’s photograph features a soldier next to a large and powerful automatic weapon brushing his teeth (Fig. 28). Lucaites writes that “such soldiers might be stationed far from home and under less-than-normal circumstances, their lives may be at risk and they might even be called upon to kill or die in the name of God and country, but for all of that the basic habits of a civilized people abide...they feign to suggest that



Fig. 29 - Sayed Salahuddin, *Reuters*, 2001

⁶¹ Brian Glyn Williams. *Afghanistan Declassified: A Guide to America’s Longest War*. (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012): 68-69

⁶² Sebastian Junger. “Into the Valley of Death.” *Vanity Fair*. Online. January 2008. Accessed 01 December 2011.
<http://www.vanityfair.com/politics/features/2008/01/afghanistan200801>

one can fight a war and still maintain clean hands.”⁶³ Again, beyond levity, this photograph reminds us that American levels of comfort still remain in the Taliban-infested jungle. When seen against Larry Burrows’ photograph of wounded soldiers lying in muck, the ideological orientation of the photographs are apparent. The sense of grimy hardship has been sterilized from most depictions of the war in Afghanistan.

The civilian casualties and maimings resulting from so-called precision bombing and Kill/Capture missions are consistently absent from photographic accounts of the wars despite

Hamid Karzai’s almost yearly pleas to the U.S. to curtail “collateral” damage.⁶⁴ Reuter’s has published a few of these photographs online over the course of the war; however,



Fig. 30 - Unattributed, *Department of Defense*, 2005



Fig. 31 - Noor Kahn, *Associated Press*, 2005

⁶³ John Lucaites. “Out, Damn Spot!” *No Caption Needed Blog*. Online. 25 September 2011. Accessed 30 November 2011.

<http://www.nocaptionneeded.com/index.php?s=out+damn+spot&Submit=Search>

⁶⁴ For the past six years, see: Pamela Constable. “Karzai Says Civilian Toll is No Longer Acceptable.” *The Washington Post*. Online. 03 May 2007. Accessed. 17 March 2012.

[http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-](http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2007/05/02/AR2007050202757.html?hpid=sec-world)

[dyn/content/article/2007/05/02/AR2007050202757.html?hpid=sec-world](http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2007/05/02/AR2007050202757.html?hpid=sec-world), “Karzai ‘demands’ Obama end civilian deaths after latest incident.” *USA Today*. Online. 05 November 2008. Accessed 17 March 2012. http://www.usatoday.com/news/world/2008-11-05-afghanistan-violence_N.htm, “Karzai protests civilian deaths.” *The New York Times*. Online. 25 January 2009. Accessed 17 March 2012.

<http://www.nytimes.com/2009/01/25/world/asia/25iht-25karzai.19659063.html>, “Karzai hits out over civilian deaths.” *Aljazeera*. Online. 05 January 2010. Accessed 17 March 2012. <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/asia/2010/01/20101515212380429.html>, Erika Gaston. “Karzai’s civilian death ultimatum.” *AFP/PAK Foreign Policy*. Online. 02 June

they have never been published in print by mainstream western news organizations (Fig. 29). The harm done by these well-meaning warriors from the portraits is nearly invisible, unclear. Marc Harold, an economics professor at the University of New Hampshire, has written extensively on the subject. In a 2006 paper about Afghani civilian casualties, he cited two images, one depicting a soldier giving a young Afghan boy a tee-shirt (Fig. 30), and another of a younger boy on life support for the wounds he sustained during a U.S. precision bombing on his village, Hajiyan (Fig. 31). He wrote: “Both pictures are ‘true’ and neither one alone represents reality. Both illustrate two images of modern war: the war to win hearts and minds and the war to kill the enemy. They are inseparable.”⁶⁵

Perhaps the most ubiquitous photographs from the war in Vietnam depicted the direct effects and collateral damage from the “war to kill the enemy:” Eddie Adams’ photograph of the assassination of the Vietcong prisoner, Nick Ut’s photograph of the naked, napalm-burned Kim Phuc, Ronald Haeberle’s photograph of the bodies in the street at My Lai. In light of these photographs it is almost obvious why only photographs of “the war to win the hearts and minds” currently make it to publication. Each one of the previously mentioned photographs from the war in Vietnam was used for propaganda by

2011. Accessed 17 March 2012.

http://afpak.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2011/06/02/karzais_civilian_casualties Ultimatum, “Afghan leader Karzai at ‘end of rope’ over civilian deaths.” *The Los Angeles Times*. Online. 16 March 2012. Accessed 17 March 2012.

http://latimesblogs.latimes.com/world_now/2012/03/afghanistan-hamid-karzai-end-of-the-rope.html.

⁶⁵ Harold, Marc W. *Grab News Headlines, Isolate Bombed Area and Stonewall: U.S. Military’s Virtual Reality about Afghan Civilian Casualties. A Case Study of the U.S.* Self published on May 26, 2006, accessed August 28, 2011.

<http://pubpages.unh.edu/~mwhero/Grab%20News%20Headlines%20essay%20%20May%202006.pdf>.

the anti-war movement, most notably the My Lai photograph, which became the famous *And Babies* poster by the hands of the Art Workers' Coalition.

Even though Osama bin Laden's killing maintained this precedent of censorship, it



Fig. 32 - Pete Souza, *White House*, 2011

generated arguably the most iconic image from the war in Afghanistan. That image is Pete Souza's photograph of President Barack Obama with his top advisors in the Situation Room during the raid on Osama bin Laden's compound (Fig. 32). In ways, it is allegorical of the censorship: the American people all stared at their televisions and computer screens waiting for the images, and all they got was a reflection of themselves, represented in Souza's photograph by their elected officials, staring. The composition is weighted heavily on the right, but is balanced so evenly on the left by the substantial presence of what is seen by the officials, but unseen by us. Even if a closer look is taken, perhaps to search for a reflection, a clue about what exactly is outside the frame, all that is found are remnants of censorship in the form of chunky pixels. The irony is that pixilation is exactly what happens when you get too close to a digital image: it breaks down into the same kind of abstraction.

Recall Michelangelo Antonioni's 1966 feature *Blow-Up* in which the photographer, Thomas, investigates his suspicions surrounding some seemingly uneventful photographs of a man and woman in a park, only to discover a corpse in the

bushes. The closer he gets to the image, the more information it reveals to him, and yet the more it degrades into abstraction. His friend Patricia remarks that the blown up body looks like a splatter painting – the implication being that Thomas is perhaps only discovering a kind of subjective Rorschach-ian interpretation; he is only seeing his own suspicion, anxiety, and victimization gestalted from the non-descript spots.

The same is true of the Souza image, and yet no enlargement is needed. Too close just comes too soon. The viewer's murder investigation comes to a startling halt when all the clues are found blurred, cropped, and blanked off of the screens. There is no corpse in the bushes. The only details that are found reaffirm that no relevant information is available. It is almost startling how quickly this image undergoes a fundamental shift upon viewing. The image, once considered as a window into the Situation Room, becomes a mirror. Where one expects to find information, there is only reflection, refraction.

Let's not forget that the Souza image has since been steeped in a bit of controversy with regard to what is excluded from the frame. The President and his top advisors in this scene are privy to an image that we will likely never see. The primary argument for censorship of the bin Laden death photos and the other photos of the raid on the Abbottabad compound was that we would be protected from the hardship those who saw the photos and the body itself endured. It was an argument for discretion. The White House described the photos as graphically "gruesome," and was concerned that the images would be "inflammatory" if released.⁶⁶ This argument was presented as a kind of

⁶⁶ Legro, Tom. "Obama Decides Against Release of Bin Laden Body Photos." *The Rundown: PBS Newshour*, May 4, 2011, accessed August 29, 2011.

anti-ideology, as if to say, “We are preventing these photos from reaching the public because we are not ideological.” The photographs were painted, in this sense, as tools of ideology. The decision to release the photos, by this mindset, would be a decision to reinforce anti-Arab sentiment, hidden in the guise of merely providing proof of the occurrence of an event.

President Obama’s decision to lift the 18-year ban on photographs of American coffins returning from war in February of 2009 was deemed disrespectful to grieving families and was resurrected in light of the bin Laden censorship controversy. Not surprisingly, the objection to the sight of American coffins often came from the same direction as those who would release the bin Laden photo. Numerous bloggers, from John Miller of *National Review* to *Townhall.com*’s Katie Pavich, accused President Obama of being soft on terror. Pavich quipped, “Obama won’t release a single photo of a dead Osama bin Laden in order to avoid ‘offending’ the Muslim world, but openly supports the idea of photos being taken of our dead troops, killed by our enemies under bin Laden.”⁶⁷ This seems to be the ideological shifting point.

CNN’s Anderson Cooper would have it the other way around. On the very night that Americans were told of Osama bin Laden’s death by the hands of U.S. Navy SEALs, Cooper broadcast from Ground Zero. In his closing monologue, his message, in retrospect, has a very interesting sentiment: remember the victims and soon forget Osama bin Laden’s name. He said, while accompanied, perhaps appropriately, by the ceaseless

<http://www.pbs.org/newshour/rundown/2011/05/administration-weighing-release-of-images-of-bin-laden.html>.

⁶⁷ Pavlich, Katie. “Obama: Releasing Photos of U.S. Troops KIA Fine, Photo of Osama Not Happening.” *TownHall.com*, May 4, 2011, accessed August 29, 2011. For John Miller’s commentary, see <http://www.nationalreview.com/corner/266509/photo-finish-john-j-miller>.

jackhammers of the reconstruction efforts hammering alongside his composed words, “We are a country that does not drag the bodies of our enemies through the streets. We do not behead them for the entertainment of others. We do not mutilate their corpses. I think of his body sinking into the sea, disappearing into the dark depths of the ocean. This man who terrorized so many for so long has simply disappeared...there will be no grave marker for him.”⁶⁸ Following this, he showed slides of the American victims of the World Trade Center attacks, which easily recall *LIFE Magazine*’s “One Week’s Dead.”

It sure is nice to know that American's no longer drag the bodies of our enemies through the streets. After all, they once did. In fact, it is likely because of the Haeberle’s images of the massacre at My Lai, of the bodies of the woman and children *and babies* of our enemies lying in the streets and others like it, that the Vietnam War has become, perhaps even for the most boisterous warmongers, a point of shame in American history. There is no comparison to be made between the innocent families slaughtered in My Lai and the assassination of a mass murderer, who, given the chance, would likely kill again. However, this policy of withholding images is not exclusive to the circumstances of bin Laden’s demise. There is a pattern of American policy on such matters that demands the question: “What would we see if we saw these images?” The question hangs over the image of the Situation Room like a dark cloud.

As a mirror, the Situation Room image reveals to us a vision of ourselves. We see ourselves searching for truth, but also victimized by the idea of the content of that truth. With the soldier portraits and other depictions of the victimization of Americans and their

⁶⁸ Cooper, Anderson. “I Hope It Is Their Names We Speak.” *CNN: Anderson Cooper 360*. May 3, 2011, accessed August 29, 2011. <http://www.cnn.com/video/?/video/bestoftv/2011/05/03/exp.ac.remembering.911.victims.cnn>.

“allies,” we look for the truth of the nature of the war, and see only the effects of subjective violence. The effects of violence appeal to our empathy, causing us to see ourselves wounded by the very same violence. It is in this way that the very depiction of the effects of subjective violence seems, on a basic level, a condemnation of the agent of that violence. This process is the refracting nature of victimization in photographs. Censorship of images then, by reciprocal logic, would prevent hypothetical empathy for the transgressed subject resulting from the experience of the enemy in the photograph-mirror as the wounded self.

This seems to also confer a paradoxical exemption on the enemy. The censorship of the images prevented empathy, but also inevitably maintained that the members of the American viewing public were victims of a specifically-invisible enemy. First on 9/11, Americans were victims of the impossible event occurring, as Jacques Derrida famously characterized it: an event that is past once it was realized as possible.⁶⁹ The tragedy of 9/11 is partly that the past-ness of it can never be changed, and every photograph reaffirmed to us that it would never be part of a present that could be changed or affected. We were victims of this perpetual realization through the millions of photographs that confronted us following the event of 9/11.

Bin Laden could not disappear like Cooper suggested because he never appeared. The perpetrator of 9/11 was not a bold and visible threat, but an invisible man, hiding in the mountains somewhere in the Middle East. As we plumb the Souza image like *Blow-Up*'s Thomas does to his park images, we are still on this very same hunt for physical form of the agent of terror. By keeping the death images hidden, the end of this search

⁶⁹ Giovanna Borradori. *Philosophy in a Time of Terror: Dialogues with Jürgen Habermas and Jacques Derrida*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003): 90.

then also remains invisible, impossible. As we can see in the Souza image, we are still the victims. The event that might end the perpetuation of this ideology of inevitable victimization and terror remains impossible.

3.2 Iraq

The mission in Iraq was termed



Fig. 33 - Damir Sagolj, *Reuters*, 2003

“Operation Iraqi Freedom.” This name alone suggested that the marketable angle for the war was liberation – the Iraqi people were suffering under a despotic ruler it was our responsibility to end their suffering. When the combat in Iraq officially began on March 19, 2003, without NATO sanctions, President Bush made it clear that Hussein was the primary target of the campaign in Iraq. In a televised address a few hours after the first barrage of missiles were unleashed, Bush said that “coalition forces have begun striking selected targets of military importance to undermine Saddam Hussein’s ability to wage war,” and accused Hussein of placing his “Iraqi troops and equipment in civilian areas, attempting to use innocent men, women, and children as shields for his own military.”⁷⁰

The first reinforcement of President Bush’s official narrative came photographically very shortly after the invasion of Iraq and the first real battle of the war: the Battle of Nasiriyah. On March 29, 2003, after crossing the Rumaila oil fields earlier in the week, and then overtaking Nasiriyah, the 1st Marine Division faced the final enemy

⁷⁰ The Guardian. “Full Text: George Bush’s address on the start of the war.” Online. 19 March 2003. Accessed 11 January 2012.
<http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2003/mar/20/iraq.georgebush>.

resistors. According to *MSNBC*, “a crossfire on the front lines ripped apart an Iraqi family after local soldiers appeared to force civilians toward Marine positions.”⁷¹ In the aftermath, Damir Sagolj photographed U.S. Navy Hospital Corpsman HM1 Robert Barnett cradling a small Iraqi child with blood on her sleeve (Fig. 33). The photograph was nominated for a Pulitzer Prize in 2004, and is one of the more lasting examples of the early Iraq War’s invented heroes and “patriotic fables.”⁷²



Fig. 34 - Goran Tomasevic, *Reuters*, 2003

When Baghdad was taken over by U.S. troops less than a month later, Hussein fell as well. Not the actual, living, breathing man, Saddam Hussein – that would come later – but instead the totemic Hussein, in the form of a gigantic public effigy. The statue, which stood nearly 40 feet tall, was erected in Firdos Square in 2002 in honor of Hussein’s 65th birthday. It was pulled down by U.S. tanks on April 9, 2003, producing arguably the first iconic images from the Iraq War. I say *images* because there is not

⁷¹ “Iconic images from the war in Iraq.” *MSNBC*. Online. Accessed 19 March 2012. http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/38887505/ns/news-picture_stories/#.T2d262JST5g

⁷² The Battle of Nasiriyah was also the battle during which eleven US soldiers were killed and six were captured, including the now-famous Private First Class Jessica Lynch. The media and the Bush administration touted Lynch as a war hero while she was in captivity, weaving Rambo-like tales about the valor she demonstrated before her brutal imprisonment. Much to their chagrin, when Lynch was retrieved, she denied any such heroism or maltreatment. As David D. Kirkpatrick said it, she accused the military of “exaggerating accounts of her rescue and recasting her ordeal as a patriotic fable.” See David D. Kirkpatrick. “Jessica Lynch Criticizes U.S. Accounts of her Ordeal.” *The New York Times*. Online. 07 November 2003. Accessed 19 March 2012. <http://www.nytimes.com/2003/11/07/us/jessica-lynch-criticizes-us-accounts-of-her-ordeal.html?ref=jessicalynch>.

really one definitive image that has stood out among the thousands taken from the event (Fig. 34). So many images exist because, during the Iraq War, Firdos Square was the location of the Palestine Hotel, which housed the majority of international press members. The spectacle was broadcast around the world.

The circumstances of the photographed event are symbolic of the official explanation of the war. On a Wednesday morning after traveling by tank to Firdos Square, Marines discovered several Iraqis attempting to

topple the statue with a rope, identified with their struggle to bring it down, and lent them a hand with a military crane. This is how Operation Iraqi Freedom was billed – the U.S. was successfully aiding the Iraqi people in a struggle of their own.

Unlike the early iconic photographs from Vietnam, rather than countering the official narrative and naïve assumptions about war, this early iconic photograph from the Iraq War reestablished those fundamental mischaracterizations.

Another great example of a photograph that was of use in “inventing heroes” was Luis Sinco’s photograph of Marine Lance



Fig. 35 - Cover of the November 10, 2004 issue of the *New York Post* featuring photograph by Luis Sinco



Fig. 36 – Luis Sinco, Associated Press, 2004



Fig. 37 - Ed Clark, *Getty Images*, 1949

Corporal James Blake Miller smoking a cigarette during the Second Battle of Fallujah (Fig. 35). This photograph is better known as the “Marlboro Marine,” and was featured on the cover of the *New York Post* on November 10, 2004 (Fig. 36), among numerous other publications, and was nominated for the Pulitzer Prize in 2005. The *New York Post* headline read “Marlboro Men Kick Butt in Fallujah.” Compared it to Henri Huet’s photograph of zombie-like American soldiers in the Central Highlands on the February 1966 cover of *LIFE Magazine*, which was captioned a sobering “The War Goes On.” Sinco’s photograph and its sentiments share more with shots of John Wayne during the production of *Sands of Iwo Jima* (Fig. 37) than it does with Huet’s photograph of the dirty, battle-deranged soldiers fighting the early stages of the Vietnam War. In 2005, confidence fully broke in the war in Iraq. Yet, rather than effectively symbolizing the “dire, calamitous arc” of the war to come the way photographs like Huet’s and Burrow’s would before 1968, Sinco’s photograph made LCpl Miller “a celebrity poster boy for the U.S. effort in Fallujah and a hero in his hometown.”⁷³



Fig. 38 - Michael Yon, *U.S. Army* via *Associated Press*, 2005

The other poster boy of the early-mid war period was Major Mark Bieger, who, like Barnett in the first few days of the invasion, was caught in the act of cradling a young Iraqi girl who was wounded by an insurgent’s car bomb (Fig. 38). In this situation, the photographer had specifically

⁷³ Patrick Gallahue. “Marlboro Marine Fires Up Troop Morale.” *The New York Post*. 14 November 2004. Online. <http://www.freerepublic.com/focus/f-news/1279813/posts>

intended to utilize the photograph to create empathy for the troops. Like many of these photographs, the meaning attributed to them is largely determined by the context into which they are framed. When war-critics like Michael Moore and *Shock Magazine* used the photograph in an attempt to paint a negative picture of the war (Fig. 39), Michael Yon, the photographer who shot the image, launched a massive campaign to have the photographs removed. In the case of Michael Moore, who simply posted the photograph on his website, Yon threatened a lawsuit for copyright violation.

With *Shock Magazine*, the situation was a little more complicated. The caption on the cover of *Shock* drew on an all-too sensitive comparison: “ON THE FRONT – WAR IS STILL HELL! Jarring proof that Iraq is the new Vietnam (their emphasis).”⁷⁴ Yon alleged that *Shock* used the photograph without permission, but his citation of this infringement was not only to protect his legal and monetary rights as a photographer. Yon used his legitimate legal rights to enforce what he considered to be an equally legitimate claim to the connotation and aesthetics of the image. In an interview with *Media Orchard*, Yon was asked how much his suit actually had to do with his desire to strictly enforce his copyright. He replied that his challenge to *Shock’s* use

is evenly divided between three points of contention: first, the fact of the infringement is a clear cut case of using my property without my permission; second, (a) the manner in which the image was used to frame an article that denigrates our military, (the polar opposite message from what I contend is conveyed by the image) (b) the use of the image in a publication that I think is lame, hackneyed, and beneath contempt and (c) the timing of the launch to coincide with Memorial Day; and, third, the bad faith HFM demonstrated throughout our negotiations.⁷⁵

⁷⁴ Hachette Filipacchi. *Shock Magazine*. May 2006: cover.

⁷⁵ “Media Orchard Interviews Michael Yon.” *Media Orchard*. Online. 19 June 2006. Accessed 19 March 2012. <http://www.ideagrove.com/blog/2006/06/media-orchard-interviews-michael-yon.html>.

The interesting questions here are these: What determines connotation, or more politically, the ideological direction of an image? Content or intent? Reader or author? Yon can certainly make a claim to the denotation, but can he speak for what “is conveyed by the image?”

Yon’s background is especially relevant to the *Shock*’s “hackneyed” headline comparing the Iraq War to the Vietnam War. Yon served in the Vietnam War as one of the famed “Green Beret.” The Green Beret themselves were one of the few attempts by the military to mythologize the Vietnam War into a “patriotic fable” of its own.⁷⁶ Yon’s book, *Moment of Truth In Iraq*, uses his photograph of Bieger to communicate exactly the opposite message that *Shock*



Fig. 39 - Cover of the May 2006 issue of Shock Magazine featuring photograph by Michael Yon



Fig. 40 - Unattributed, 2003

⁷⁶ At the height of public dissent in 1968, John Wayne himself was so insulted by the anti-war sentiments that he obtained full cooperation from President Johnson to produce *The Green Berets*. The film itself is a thinly veiled piece of anti-communist propaganda that has more of a place in the 1950s than it did amidst the raucous political tensions of 1968. Nonetheless, since their inception in the early 1950s, and until their replacement in the cultural lexicon by the US Navy SEALs, the Green Berets served as the symbol of elite military might in popular culture. See Moore, Robin “Introduction to 1999 edition.” *The Green Berets: The Amazing Story of the U.S. Army’s Elite Special Forces Unit* (New York: Skyhorse Publishing, 2007).

tried to deliver with the photograph. Of the book, the publisher, *Richard Vigilante Books*, wrote (in praise) “Reading this book is like watching the movie *Apocalypse Now*, but in an alternate universe in which the opposite always happens. Every time our soldiers get into an incredibly tense situation...our guys pull it off!”⁷⁷

Saddam Hussein was discovered hiding in an underground lair on December 13, 2003. In this situation, the soldiers who located him did in fact “pull it off.” The photograph from this event, which emerged in August of 2004, pictured Saddam as a kind of hunting trophy (Fig. 40), lending

visual support to Major General Ray Odierno’s quote from the day: “He was caught like a rat.”⁷⁸ In the photograph, Samir Al-Jassim, an Iraqi-turned-American who fled Saddam’s regime shortly after the Persian Gulf War, proudly, yet anonymously, reported to the *River Front Times* that he had “punched Saddam in the face.”⁷⁹



Fig. 41 - Unattributed, *Department of Defense*, 2003

⁷⁷ “Message from the Publisher.” *Richard Vigilante Books*. Online. 2010. Accessed 19 March 2011.

⁷⁸ Bret Baier, Rita Cosby and Jim Angle. “Saddam Captured ‘Like A Rat’ in Raid.” *Fox News*. Online. 14 December 2003. Accessed 20 March 2012. <http://www.foxnews.com/story/0,2933,105706,00.html>.

⁷⁹ Chad Garrison. “I Punched Saddam in the Face.” *The River Front Times*. Online. 13 April 2005. Accessed 20 March 2012. <http://www.riverfronttimes.com/2005-04-13/news/i-punched-saddam-in-the-mouth/>.

After he was brought in, Saddam was treated to a kind of extreme exposure. The image that accompanied the news of his identification and incarceration was the still from his dental exam, the video of which was shot by an anonymous military photographer (Fig. 41). W.J.T. Mitchell found this image to be a resounding victory for Iraq War propagandists for two primary reasons:

First, it defused any hint of cruelty by staging Saddam's captors as looking after his health, perhaps determining whether he had developed any cavities or abscesses during his underground existence, or preventing him from committing suicide with a cyanide capsule embedded in one of his teeth. Second, it suggested that the U.S. military had finally achieved the elusive objective of total victory, since now it had penetrated "inside the head" of the head of state. Any remaining secrets would now come to light, and it did not take long, in fact, for the image to be reproduced with a new caption: "the search for weapons of mass destruction continues."⁸⁰



Fig. 42 - Cover of the May 2006 issue of *The Sun* featuring an anonymous leaked photograph

This image of the penetration of the head of state, coupled with Bush's notorious "Mission Accomplished" photo-op, cast the Iraq War in a very pointed light. Where it is commonly believed that the Vietnam War was an unwinnable quagmire with no clear objectives, the Iraq War, as imagined by these photographs, was not only a war with a visible (penetrable) objective, it was a war that's objective was completed.

Later, in 2006, a soldier leaked photographs to Rupert Murdoch's tabloid *The Sun*. They published the most humiliating photograph on the front page (Fig. 42), as did the

⁸⁰ W.J.T. Mitchell. *Cloning Terror: The War of Images, 9/11 to the Present*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011): 94.

The New York Post, which featured Saddam doing laundry in his underwear. *The Sun* claimed that the photographs needed to be seen because they thought seeing Saddam, “once the world’s most feared despot with the blood of innocent thousands on his murderous hands, now...reduced to shuffling around his prison compound in his underpants and washing his **OWN** dirty socks in a simple bowl (their emphasis).”⁸¹ Immediately after their printing, the U.S. military vowed to aggressively investigate the lead of the photographs because they “appeared to breach Geneva Convention rules on the humane treatment of prisoners of war.”⁸²

Despite the obligatory objection to the content of the image published by *The Sun*, the official image of Saddam released to the press achieved the same objective – humanizing and therefore demythologizing the former sovereign by invasively depicting his physicality. This similarity testifies not to the newsworthiness of the leaked photo, because frankly Saddam’s dental exam was not particularly newsworthy. The similarity in the objectives of these images instead should reflect on the tabloid-quality of Saddam’s presentation in the Western media once captured.

⁸¹ Tom Newton Dunn. “Tyrant’s in his pants.” *The Sun*. Online. Updated 31 July 2007. Accessed 21 March 2012. <http://www.thesun.co.uk/sol/homepage/news/107535/Tyrants-in-his-pants.html>.

⁸² “Saddam Underwear Photo Angers US.” *BBC News*. Online. 20 May 2005. Accessed 21 March 2012. <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/4565505.stm>.

Of course, the war had taken a very ugly turn with regard to other prisoners of war in May of 2004 with the leak of the Abu Ghraib archive. Until that point, the enormously encouraging photographic narrative seemed entirely justified even though only the paper objectives had been achieved – the Iraqi people were still caught in a bloody civil war, and no weapons of mass destruction had been found.

In the case of the Abu Ghraib prisoner abuse photos, reality would provide its own sinister *detournement* of the invented hero photographs that were popular early in the war. This unintended *detournement* is the case with the notorious photograph, referred to as “the photograph with the smile (Fig. 43).” This photograph is one of the now infamous photographs taken by the 372nd MP Brigade serving at Abu Ghraib prison, west of Baghdad, in the fall of 2003. The photograph was taken by Chuck Graner of

Sabrina Harman posing with a smile and a thumbs-up next to the body of a recently murdered prisoner, Manadel al-Jamadi. This image, in a lot of ways, speaks against soldiers more effectively than equivalent images from Vietnam. The protagonist in this photo, Harman, is reacting to the corpse of al-Jamadi with delight rather than nonchalance.



Fig. 43 - Charles Graner, 2004

As damage control, Bush administration disavowed Harman and the others, suggesting that she was one of a few bad apples that did not otherwise ruin the whole bunch. This reaction came almost immediately after the release of the photos. During the *60 Minutes* segment, which broke the news on May 06, 2004, Dan Rather interviewed General Mark Kimmet. During the interview, he made it a point not only to disavow the acts, but those responsible: “This is reprehensible. But this is not representative of the 150,000 soldiers that are over here [...] I’d say the same thing to the American people ... Don’t judge your Army based on the actions of a few...”⁸³

When Lynndie England, the soldier who would bear a large amount of the legal punishment for Abu Ghraib, was photographed for her trial, instead of presenting her alongside her defense team like most photographs of defendants, she was shown closely cropped by their black suited shoulders – compositionally isolated (Fig. 44). This photograph appeared on the front page of the May 03, 2005 issue of the New York Times with the caption “Guilty Plea in Abu

Ghraib Abuse.” A telling comparison is between the photograph of England as an isolated bad apple, and the photograph of Lt. Calley (the only man sentenced for



Fig. 44 - Cover of the May 03, 2005 issue of the *New York Times* featuring photograph by Paul Buck

⁸³ Rebecca Leung. “Abuse of Iraqi POWs by GIs Probed.” *CBSNews*. Online. 11 February 2009. Accessed 20 March 2012. <http://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2004/04/27/60ii/main614063.shtml>.

wrongdoing at My Lai) that appeared in the April 04, 1971 issue of the *Wisconsin State Journal*. In the face of a “No More War” poster Calley smiles at the news of his pardon, because the Nixon administration refused to cast him aside.

During the time between Calley and England, an odd shift took place. It is in this shifting position that we are confronted with a fundamental aporia. While Calley was pardoned for doing his duty, for being a true “American boy,” and “not questioning how or why we should fight,”⁸⁴ England was widely reproached for *not* questioning the ethicality of her orders. There is a similar aporia when considering the role of photography.

During the high-budget documentary about the Abu Ghraib prison abuse by Errol Morris, *Standard Operating Procedure* (2008), there is a clever bit of editing when two conflicting views of photography are presented to accompany various slides of the blood remains of a murdered prisoner. Army Special Agent Brent Pack, the man who analyzed the metadata of the images to establish a timeline for the courts, perhaps unconsciously echoing Roland Barthes, describes photographs as direct records of *what had been*: “Photographs are what they are...you’re seeing what happened at that time.”⁸⁵ While SPC Megan Ambuhl, one of the military police stationed at the prison during the time of the abuse, did not grant the images the same kind of truth-value. She described the images as mere slices of frozen time, framing as much out of view as they frame in, incapable of the same kind of historical truth content that memory allows: “[the circumstance of the actual event] doesn’t appear when you see a picture...the pictures

⁸⁴ Harry Rosenthal. “America’s Nerve Touched by My Lai Verdict.” *Wisconsin State Journal*. 04 April 1971: 4.

⁸⁵ Errol Morris (director). (2008). *Standard Operating Procedure* [DVD] (Los Angeles: Sony Pictures Classics), 1:39:44 – 1:40:05.

only show you a fraction of a second. You don't see forward and you don't see backward and you don't see outside the frame.”⁸⁶

⁸⁶ Morris, 1:21:25 – 1:22:16.

CHAPTER 4. CONCLUSION: PHOTOGRAPHY, RESPONSIBILITY, AND EUPHEMISMS

Throughout wars in Vietnam, Iraq, and Afghanistan, allegations were rampant of gross collateral damage from U.S. combat strategies. R.J. Rummel estimated that between 800,000 and 1,200,000 civilians died in both North and South Vietnam during the twenty years of U.S. involvement in Vietnam. The Iraq War Logs released by *WikiLeaks* showed 66,081 civilian casualties in Iraq from January 2004 to December 2009 as a result of U.S.-led invasion.⁸⁷ No such numbers definitively exist for the war in Afghanistan, as was famously extolled by U.S. General Tommy Franks, “You know we don’t do body counts.”⁸⁸ Aggregate estimates based on collective reports estimate a range of 10,000 to as many as 60,000 from 2001 – 2011 killed by U.S. and coalition forces, however many consider those numbers to be inaccurate due to the absence of systematic documentation available from the war in Iraq.⁸⁹

The images of these unintended deaths were much more numerous, and much more in the public eye during and after the Vietnam War than they have been or (presumably) will be as the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan come to a close. The impressions left by photographs from the Vietnam War, and the blame shouldered by

⁸⁷ The Guardian. “Wikileaks Iraq: data journalism maps every death.” *The Data Blog*. Online. Accessed 18 January 2012.

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/news/datablog/2010/oct/23/wikileaks-iraq-data-journalism>

⁸⁸ As quoted in “Success in Afghan war hard to gauge.” *The San Francisco Chronicle*, 23 March 2002.

⁸⁹ Crawford, Neta. “Civilian Death and Injury in Afghanistan: 2001 – 2011.”

CostofWar.org. Online. September 2011. Accessed 18 January 2012.

<http://costsofwar.org/sites/default/files/articles/14/attachments/Crawford%20Afghanistan%20Casualties.pdf>.

soldiers, lingered long after the war ended. Elizabeth Samet wrote in August of 2011, “The specter of this guilt – this perdurable archetype of the hostile homecoming – animates today’s encounters, which seem to have swung to the other unthinking extreme.”⁹⁰

To a large extent, the soldiers who went to Vietnam had, until they arrived and saw it for what it was, romanticized war. Like the ones featured in John Wayne movies, and now happily replicated in Sunset Soldiers photographs. What they realized was that the lovely and heroic fiction that they expected was just a farce. That war was dirt and pain, death and destruction. The documents of the war genuinely painted this picture – one of disillusionment before the war ended. We experienced the same war, the dirty ugly one, empathetically via the metonymical photograph. If there was any lesson to be learned photographically from Vietnam it was this – that meddling in someone else’s ideological tug-of-war was messy, un-heroic business, and that when war is shown via photographs as a youth-wrecking, travesty-riddled, cesspool of hate perpetuation, it is a powerful, relatable indictment of that war.

That lesson is what is so disturbing about the pictures of glory when they reappear to give context to the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Reality is sanitized into euphemism. Photographs from the Vietnam War initiated us into a period where we could no longer deny the power of images in the political sphere. When we see deep and nuanced portraits of soldier life, though they seem to be intended as ends in themselves, their ideological function cannot be taken for granted. After the Vietnam War, it’s hard to not

⁹⁰ Elizabeth Samet. “On War, Guilt and ‘Thank You For Your Service.’” *Bloomberg View*. Online. 01 August 2011. Accessed 21 March 2012.
<http://www.bloomberg.com/news/2011-08-02/war-guilt-and-thank-you-for-your-service-commentary-by-elizabeth-samet.html>.

be cynical about those images that I've called "patriotic fables." In glorifying and sentimentalizing the soldier, those photographs glorify and sentimentalize war in itself, which is most often neither glorious nor worthy of sentiment.

With photojournalism, the problem of objectivity is at the heart of the problem of ideology. Despite the fact that on some level cameras record accurately whatever is framed in the lens, connotation interferes. Looking at an image of the tortured body of an enemy elicits an emotional response from the viewer that leads to empathy. Sometimes this is unwarranted. Defendants who are being tried for violent crimes often appeal especially inflammatory photographs. They claim that photographs are inadmissible evidence based on the fact that they are inflammatory and invoke a prejudiced response that is unfair to the person accused of the crimes.⁹¹

If photographs of soldiers abusing the enemy are in fact mischaracterizations, then empathy is illegitimately manufactured. Therefore, if we can be convinced that these images are generally untrue in their premises, and consider that all the images being huddled into secrecy are being hidden because they perpetuate a fundamental misconception, that although the referent appears to be abuse, in reality justice was being

⁹¹ For example: "In the matter of *Queen v. Jeffrey* (1966) in the Supreme Court of Victoria (Court of Criminal Appeal) *Barry, Smith and Gillard JJ.*, in their judgment on one of the grounds for appeal in that: the learned trial judge erred in admitting in evidence photographs that the defense requested to be excluded on the grounds that they were of little or no probative value, yet were so horrifying or gruesome in nature as to be highly prejudicial to a fair trial of the accused. In the judgment by *Smith J.*, it was argued by the appellant's council that the trial judge ought, in the exercise of his discretion, to have excluded from evidence five photographs showing the wounds, which had been inflicted on the deceased...It was said that their inflammatory and prejudicial effect was very great and far outweighed any legitimate probative effect that they could have..." John Horswell. *The Practice of Crime Scene Investigation*. (New York: Taylor & Francis, 2004): 136.

honestly done, then we can easily assume this kind of empathy prevention is not only warranted, but, on some level, ethical.

Ultimately, what this all drives down to are questions about responsibility and rights. Do news organizations and the government have a responsibility to show the public the ugly side of war or to shield them from it? Does the public have a right to see those ugly photographs? If the public can claim a right to access photographed content, then what about the rights of photographed persons? If the photographed person is held responsible for the content of the image, can that person claim any rights to the image? Any answer to any of these questions inevitably affects the answer to the other questions.

Photographs that imagined the Vietnam War both encouraged and reflected public opposition to war, making real and visible the crimes that take place under the aegis of a responsibility to police the world. However, the burden of those crimes fell onto the soldiers. It was the soldiers who functioned in the photographs as a metonym for the ugly war, where some would claim the unjust State was more legitimately at fault.

Photographers during the Vietnam War felt a responsibility to document the horrors, and media organizations felt a responsibility to show those images to the public. In doing so however, the photographers violated the rights of the photographed persons and their post-war reputations.

Photographs from the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan picture soldiers as worthy of a respect they were long denied. Photographers who were ejected from their embeds were ejected for violating the rights of photographed persons, but in being ejected they were prevented from bringing the public a view of the ugly side of war. In addition, the redemption of the character of the soldier doesn't reassign the blame for the atrocities

committed. It further masks the trail leading to those responsible. In that masking, though it redeems the soldier from shame, it allows for the continuation of conflicts that cost too many lives, foreign and domestic.

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